

# PRAYING *with* PAUL

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A Call to Spiritual Reformation

SECOND EDITION

D. A. CARSON

  
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This book is gratefully dedicated  
to Mark and Connie Dever.



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## Preface

I doubt if there is any Christian who has not sometimes found it difficult to pray. In itself this is neither surprising nor depressing: it is not surprising because we are still pilgrims with many lessons to learn; it is not depressing because struggling with such matters is part of the way we learn.

What is both surprising and depressing is the sheer prayerlessness that characterizes so much of the Western church. It is surprising because it is out of step with the Bible, which portrays what Christian living should be; it is depressing because it frequently coexists with abounding Christian activity that somehow seems hollow, frivolous, and superficial. Scarcely less disturbing is the enthusiastic praying in some circles that overflows with emotional release but is utterly uncontrolled by any thoughtful reflection on the prayers of Scripture.

I wish I could say I always avoid these pitfalls. The truth is that I am a part of what I condemn. But if we are to make any headway in reforming our personal and corporate praying, then we shall have to begin by listening afresh to Scripture and seeking God's help in understanding how to apply Scripture to our lives, our homes, and our churches.

This book is not a comprehensive theology of prayer, set against the background of modern debate on the nature of spirituality. Elsewhere I have been involved in a project that attempted something along those lines.<sup>1</sup> Here the aim is far simpler: to work through several of Paul's

prayers in such a way that we hear God speak to us today, and to find strength and direction to improve our praying, both for God’s glory and for our good.

This book began its life as a series of seven sermons preached in various settings. The sequence of seven was delivered in only one place: the Church Missionary Society “summer school” in New South Wales, in early January 1990. Humanly speaking, the timing was inauspicious: my mother had died on New Year’s Eve. Yet taking that wrenching step to fulfill my previous commitment served only to demonstrate once again that God’s strength is displayed in our weakness, for the meetings in New South Wales were full of the presence and power of the Lord. I am grateful to my father and brother for urging me to continue with the meetings, and to Rev. Peter and Joan Tasker and to (then) Archdeacon Victor and Delle Roberts and their colleagues for their warmth and encouragement. I am grateful, too, to Baker Publishing Group for their interest in this expository study and for their practical suggestions as to how best to turn seven rather lengthy sermons into shorter chapters for the printed page. Preachers interested in how these chapters were originally configured might want to look at the “extended note” that concludes the “Notes” section of this book. Finally, I am grateful to my teaching assistant, Daniel Ahn, for compiling the indexes for this new edition.

The content of these pages is substantially what was given in oral form, but the style has been modified for the printed page. Because of the anticipated readership, I have not included a bibliography except where I actually cite a source. To facilitate the use of this book in group study and in Sunday school classes, I have included questions at the end of each chapter. The questions sometimes require factual answers (and are therefore useful for review) and sometimes require reflection, debate, or further study. For those who want to engage the material in more depth, The Gospel Coalition ([thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org)) has developed a study guide, DVD, and leader’s kit for use in small groups.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

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## Introduction

### *Neglected Prayer*

**M**ore than twenty years ago, in the first edition of this book (1992), the initial few pages argued that the most urgent need of the church in the Western world is the need to pray. The argument was straightforward. I raised a variety of potential alternatives to the “most urgent need” claim, and in each case prayer won out.

It would be easy to make the same argument today. We might begin by listing other urgent needs and assessing their right to preeminence. For example, in an age of rising biblical illiteracy, there is an urgent need for the best, the most captivating, the most anointed expository ministry. In an age of greed and consumerism, we must have a rise in integrity and generosity. At a time when sexual promiscuity excites little notice, let alone serious attention, we long for purity without prudishness. Or again, since so few people have any substantive understanding of the gospel, we need bold and articulate evangelists. Shouldn't these pressing needs take a certain priority over reforming our prayer lives?

We might expand the list of urgent things to be pursued. As part of our Christian witness, one might argue, it is essential that we demonstrate love for one another within the church (John 13:34–35), not least in practical terms at a time when many are struggling to make ends meet. We urgently need to see churches at the forefront of racial

reconciliation. When premarital sex is more common than not, when countless numbers of young men scarcely know how to shoulder responsibilities until they are in their thirties (and certainly do not know how to woo and win a wife with honor because they are still looking over their shoulders to see if something “nicer” is coming along behind them), when changes in law and custom regarding homosexuality are everywhere in the land, there is urgent need for clearheaded thinking as to what marriage is. Meanwhile the widespread loss of Judeo-Christian values in the West means, among other things, that there is less and less ethical consensus in most Western nations. One of the consequences of this development is that the virtue of tolerance no longer involves considerations about how far individuals (and indeed the culture at large) may be permitted to deviate from such values, but has in many quarters become the supreme virtue. In other words, when tolerance is not linked to a widely agreed-upon ethical structure—we *tolerate* those who disagree with that structure—but is untethered to any structure, it becomes the supreme good, and soon becomes astonishingly *intolerant* of those who disagree with this new tolerance. All these perceived needs clamor for attention. Should they not be addressed at least as urgently as the reformation of our habits of prayer, both personal and corporate?

Or perhaps we should focus on church planting and mission. The last century and a half have witnessed worldwide expansion of the gospel, but there are still thousands of unreached people groups. Moreover, many areas that were in the past evangelized need to be evangelized again. One inevitably thinks of Europe. But because modern approaches to evangelism produce so many spurious conversions, even many areas that *seem* to be well evangelized are in desperate need of the powerful gospel of the New Testament—good news that not only reconciles human beings to God but transforms them. Surely the needs in these areas demand a certain precedence over other urgent calls.

Clearly all these things are important. Although this book calls for a reformation in our praying, I would not want anything I say to be taken as disparagement of evangelism and worship, a diminishing of the importance of purity and integrity, a carelessness about disciplined Bible

study. But there is a sense in which these urgent needs are symptomatic of a far more serious lack. The one thing we most urgently need is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.

When it comes to knowing God, many of us constitute a culture of the spiritually stunted. So much of our religion is packaged to address our felt needs—and these are almost uniformly anchored in our pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, without rightly understanding where true happiness and fulfillment lie. God becomes the Great Being who, potentially at least, meets our needs and fulfills our aspirations. We think too little of what he is like, of his wisdom, knowledge, power, love, transcendence, mystery, and glory. We are not intoxicated by his holiness and his love; his thoughts and words capture too little of our imagination, too little of our discourse, too few of our priorities. Many of our religious exercises and verbal expressions feel painfully unreal, inauthentic, merely formulaic.

In the biblical view of things, a deeper knowledge of God brings with it improvement in the other areas mentioned: purity, integrity, a willingness to sacrifice, evangelistic faithfulness, better study of Scripture, improved private and corporate worship, better relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ, a heart for the lost, and much more. But if we seek these things without passionately desiring a deeper knowledge of God, we may be running after God's blessings or pursuing God's power without running after him. We are worse than shallow lovers who want the advantages of having a spouse without wanting soul intimacy—worse, I say, because God is more than any wife, any husband: he is perfect in his love, and he has made us for himself, and our goals and joys are rightly found in him.

Even so, this is not a book that directly meets the challenge to know God better. Rather, it addresses one small but vital part of that challenge. One of the foundational steps in knowing God, and one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer—spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer. Writing almost two centuries ago, Robert Murray M'Cheyne declared, "What a man is alone and on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." But we have ignored this truism. We have learned to organize, build institutions, publish books,

insert ourselves into the media, develop evangelistic church-planting strategies, and administer discipleship programs, but is it not obvious that we have forgotten how to pray?

Most pastors testify to the decline in personal, family, and corporate prayers in much of the Western world. Well-organized “concerts of prayer” may be good things, but some of them, at least, are light-years away from prayer meetings held in parts of the world that have tasted a breath of heaven-sent revival. Moreover, it is far from clear that they are changing the prayer habits of our churches or the private prayer discipline of significant numbers of believers.

But we may probe more deeply. Where is our delight in praying? Where is our sense that we are meeting with the living God, that we are undertaking work that he has assigned, that we are interceding with genuine unction before the throne of grace? When was the last time we came away from a period of intercession feeling that, like Jacob or Moses, we had prevailed with God? How much of our praying is largely formulaic?

I do not write these things to manipulate you or to engender guilty feelings. But what shall we *do*? Have not many of us tried at one point or another to improve our praying and floundered so badly that we became more discouraged than ever? Do you not sense, with me, the severity of the problem? Granted that most of us know some individuals who are remarkable prayer warriors, is it not nevertheless true that by and large we are better at organizing than agonizing? Better at administering than interceding? Better at fellowship than fasting? Better at entertainment than worship? Better at theological articulation than spiritual adoration? Better—God help us!—at preaching than at praying?

What is wrong? Is not this sad state of affairs some sort of index of our knowledge of God? Shall we not agree with J. I. Packer when he writes, “I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face”?<sup>1</sup> Can we profitably meet the other challenges that confront the Western church if prayer is ignored as much as it has been? Do not the words of James resonate with truth? “You do not

have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2–3).

My aim, then, in these chapters is to mingle a little bit of practical advice on praying with prolonged meditations on some of Paul’s prayers. Just as God’s Word must reform our theology, our ethics, and our practices, so also must it reform our praying. The chief purpose of this book, then, is to think through some of Paul’s prayers, so that we may align our prayer habits with his. We want to learn what to pray for, what arguments to use, what priorities we should adopt, what beliefs should shape our prayers, and much more. We might have moved toward this goal by examining the prayers of Moses, of David, of Jeremiah, or of Daniel. But here we focus on Paul, and especially on Paul’s petitions, acknowledging that the focus is limited. We shall try to grasp not only the rudiments of Paul’s prayers but also how Christians can adopt Paul’s theology of prayer into their own attempts to pray. And since lasting renewal and true reformation spring from the work of the Holy Spirit as he takes the Word and applies it to our lives, it is important for me as I write this, and for you as you read it, to pause frequently and ask that the Holy Spirit will take whatever is biblically faithful and useful in these meditations and so apply it to our lives that our praying will be permanently transformed.

## Questions for Review and Reflection

1. What is the most pressing need in your local church? Defend your view.
2. Although this book is concerned with encouraging biblical praying, quite obviously it is possible to pray without any real knowledge of the living God. How can this be so? Are there certain kinds of prayers that should be avoided? If so, what are they?



# 1

## Lessons from the School of Prayer

**T**hroughout my spiritual pilgrimage, two sources have largely shaped, and continue to shape, my own prayer life: the Scriptures and more mature Christians.

The less authoritative of these two has been the advice, wisdom, and example of senior saints. I confess I am not a very good student in the school of prayer. Still, devoting a few pages to their advice and values may be worthwhile before I turn to the more important and more authoritative of the two sources that have taught me to pray.

Among the lessons more mature Christians have taught me, then, are these.

**1. Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray.** We do not drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray.

What we actually do reflects our highest priorities. That means we can proclaim our commitment to prayer until the cows come home, but unless we actually pray, our actions disown our words.

This is the fundamental reason why set times for prayer are important: they ensure that vague desires for prayer are concretized in regular

practice. Paul's many references to his "prayers" (e.g., Rom. 1:10; Eph. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:2) suggest that he set aside specific times for prayer—as apparently Jesus himself did (Luke 5:16). Of course, mere regularity in such matters does not ensure that effective praying takes place: genuine godliness is so easily aped, its place usurped by its barren cousin, formal religion. It is also true that different lifestyles demand different patterns: a shift worker, for instance, will have to keep changing the scheduled prayer times, while a mother of twin two-year-olds will enjoy neither the energy nor the leisure of someone living in less constrained circumstances. But after all the difficulties have been duly recognized and all the dangers of legalism properly acknowledged, the fact remains that unless we plan to pray we will not pray. The reason we pray so little is that we do not plan to pray. Wise planning will ensure that we devote ourselves to prayer often, even if for brief periods: it is better to pray often with brevity than rarely but at length. But the worst option is simply not to pray—and that will be the controlling pattern unless we plan to pray. If we intend to change our habits, we must start here.<sup>1</sup>

**2. Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift.** Anyone who has been on the Christian way for a while knows there are times when our private prayers run something like this: "Dear Lord, I thank you for the opportunity of coming into your presence by the merits of Jesus. It is a wonderful blessing to call you Father. . . . I wonder where I left my car keys? [No, no! Back to business.] Heavenly Father, I began by asking that you will watch over my family—not just in the physical sphere, but in the moral and spiritual dimensions of our lives. . . . Boy, last Sunday's sermon was sure bad. I wonder if I'll get that report written on time? [No, no!] Father, give real fruitfulness to that missionary couple we support, whatever their name is. . . . Oh, my! I had almost forgotten I promised to fix my son's bike today. . . ." Or am I the only Christian who has ever had problems with mental drift?

But you can do many things to stamp out daydreaming, to stifle reveries. One of the most useful things is to vocalize your prayers. This does not mean they have to be so loud that they become a distraction to others, or worse, a kind of pious showing off. It simply means you articulate your prayers, moving your lips perhaps; the energy devoted



to expressing your thoughts in words and sentences will order and discipline your mind and help deter meandering.

Another thing you can do is pray over the Scriptures. Christians just setting out on the path of prayer sometimes pray for everything they can think of, glance at their watches, and discover they have been at it for all of three or four minutes. This experience sometimes generates feelings of defeat, discouragement, even despair. A great way to begin to overcome this problem is to pray through various biblical passages.

In other words, it is entirely appropriate to tie your praying to your Bible reading. The reading schemes you may adopt are legion. Some Christians read a chapter a day. Others advocate three chapters a day, with five on Sunday: this will get you through the Bible in a year. I am currently following a pattern set out by Robert Murray M'Cheyne in the last century: it will take me through the Psalms and the New Testament twice during this calendar year, and the rest of the Old Testament once. Whatever the reading scheme, it is essential to read the passage slowly and thoughtfully so as to retrieve at least some of its meaning and bearing on your life. Those truths and entailments can be the basis of a great deal of reflective praying.

A slight variation of this plan is to adopt as models several biblical prayers. Read them carefully, think through what they are saying, and pray analogous prayers for yourself, your family, your church, and for many others beyond your immediate circle.

Similarly, praying through the worship sections of the better hymnals can prove immensely edifying and will certainly help you to focus your mind and heart in one direction for a while.

Some pastors pace as they pray. One senior saint I know has long made it his practice to pray through the Lord's Prayer, thinking through the implications of each petition as he goes, and organizing his prayers around those implications.<sup>2</sup> Many others make prayer lists of various sorts, a practice that will be discussed in more detail later.

This may be part of the discipline of what has come to be called journaling. At many periods in the history of the church, spiritually mature and disciplined Christians have kept what might be called spiritual journals. What such journals contain varies enormously. The Puritans

often used them to record their experiences with God, their thoughts and prayers, their triumphs and failures. Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, takes a page to record what he did and thought the day before, and then to write out some prayers for the day ahead of him.<sup>3</sup> At least one seminary now requires that its students keep such a journal throughout their years of study.

The real value of journaling, I think, is severalfold: (a) It enforces a change of pace, a slowing down. It ensures time for prayer. If you are writing your prayers, you are not daydreaming. (b) It fosters self-examination. It is an old truism that only the examined life is worth living. If you do not take time to examine your own heart, mind, and conscience from time to time, in the light of God's Word, and deal with what you find, you will become encrusted with the barnacles of destructive self-righteousness. (c) It ensures quiet articulation both of your spiritual direction and of your prayers, and this in turn fosters self-examination and therefore growth. Thus, journaling impedes mental drift.

But this is only one of many spiritual disciplines. The danger in this one, as in all of them, is that the person who is formally conforming to such a regime may delude himself or herself into thinking that the discipline is an end in itself, or that it ensures one an exalted place in the heavenlies. That is why I rather oppose the imposition of such a discipline on a body of seminary students (however much I might encourage journaling): true spirituality can never be coerced.

Such dangers aside, you can greatly improve your prayer life if you combine these first two principles: set apart time for praying, and then use practical ways to impede mental drift.

**3. At various periods in your life, develop, if possible, a prayer-partner relationship.** Incidentally, if you are not married, make sure your prayer partner is someone of your own sex. If you are married and choose a prayer partner of the opposite sex, make sure that partner is your spouse. The reason is that real praying is an immensely intimate business—and intimacy in one area frequently leads to intimacy in other areas. There is good evidence that after some of the Kentucky revivals in the last century, there was actually an *increase* in sexual promiscuity.

But whatever the hurdles that must be crossed in the pursuit of rectitude, try to develop an appropriate prayer-partner relationship.

In this connection I have been extremely fortunate. While I was still an undergraduate, in one summer vacation a single pastor took me aside and invited me to pray with him. We met once a week, on Monday nights, for the next three months. Sometimes we prayed for an hour or so, sometimes for much longer. But there is no doubt that he taught me more of the rudiments of prayer than anyone else. One or two of his lessons I shall detail later; for the moment, it is simply the importance of this one-on-one discipleship that I want to stress.

At various periods of my life, other such opportunities have come my way. For the last year or so of my doctoral study, another graduate student and I set aside time one evening a week to pray. Eventually (I was rather slow on this front), I got married. Like most couples, we have found that sustained time for prayer together is not easy to maintain. Not only do we live at a hectic pace, but also each stage of life has its peculiar pressures. When you have two or three preschool-age children, for instance, you are up early and exhausted by the evening. Still, we have tried to follow a set pattern. Quite apart from grace at meals, which may extend beyond the expected “thank you” to larger concerns, and quite apart from individual times for prayer and Bible reading, as a family we daily seek God’s face. When our kids were young, about half the time my wife or I led the family in prayer; the rest of the time, the children joined us in vocalizing their prayers. We discovered the importance of injecting freshness and innovation into such times, but that is another subject. Patterns changed somewhat when the children were in their teens. Now that my wife and I are “empty nesters,” we read Scripture together, and one or the other leads in prayer, usually after we talk about things that especially capture our focus. Before we retire at night, my wife and I invariably pray together, usually quite briefly. But in addition, at various points in our life together we have tried to set aside some time one evening a week to pray. Usually we achieve this for a few weeks, and then something breaks it up for a while. But we have tried to return to it, and we use those times to pray for family, church, students, pressing concerns of

various sorts, our children, our life's direction and values, impending ministry, and much more.

If you know how to pray, consider seeking out someone else and teaching him or her how to pray. By teaching I do not mean set lessons so much as personal example communicated in a prayer-partner relationship. Such modeling and partnership will lead to the sorts of questions that will invite further sharing and discipleship. After all, it was because Jesus's disciples observed his prayer life that they sought his instruction in prayer (Luke 11:1).

If you know little about praying, then consider seeking out someone more mature in these matters and setting up a prayer-partner relationship for a period of time. If you cannot find a person like that, then foster such a relationship with someone who is at your own level of Christian growth. Together you may discover many useful truths. Prayer-partner relationships are as valuable for the discipline, accountability, and regularity they engender as for the lessons that are shared.

There are many variations on this sort of relationship. I know a few pastors who seek out a handful of people who will meet, perhaps early in the morning, to give themselves for an hour or more to intercessory prayer. The ground rules vary quite a bit from group to group. In some suburban churches, an early-morning prayer meeting may be quite open and public, simply a good slot in the day to hold a public prayer meeting, granted the scheduling difficulties of suburbanites. But I am primarily thinking of more private groups of carefully selected prayer warriors. The ground rules for such groups may include the following: (1) Those who agree to participate must do so every week, without fail and without complaint, for a set period of time (six months?), barring, of course, unforeseen circumstances such as illness. (2) They must be Christians without any shadow of partisanship, bitterness, nurtured resentments, or affectation in their lives. In other words, they must be stamped with integrity and with genuine love for other believers, not least the obstreperous ones. (3) They must not be gossips.

Such clusters of prayer partners have been used by God again and again to spearhead powerful ministry and extravagant blessing. They may continue unnoticed for years, except in the courts of heaven. Some

little groups grow and become large prayer meetings; others multiply and divide, maintaining the same principles.

But whatever the precise pattern, there is a great deal to be said for developing godly prayer-partner relationships.

**4. Choose models—but choose them well.** Most of us can improve our praying by carefully, thoughtfully listening to others pray. This does not mean we should copy everything we hear. Some people use an informal and chatty style in prayer that reflects their own personality and perhaps the context in which they were converted; others intone their prayers before God with genuine erudition coupled with solemn formality, deploying vocabulary and forms of English considered idiomatic 350 years ago. Neither extreme is an intrinsically good model; both might be good models, but not because of relatively external habits, and certainly not because of merely cultural or personal idiosyncrasy. When we find good models, we will study their content and urgency, but we will not ape their idiom.

Not every good model provides us with exactly the same prescription for good praying, exactly the same balance. All of them pray with great seriousness; all of them use arguments and seek goals that are already portrayed in Scripture. Some of them seem to carry you with them into the very throne room of the Almighty; others are particularly faithful in intercession, despite the most difficult circumstances in life and ministry; still others are noteworthy because of the breadth of their vision. All are characterized by a wonderful mixture of contrition and boldness in prayer.

Once again, my life has been blessed by some influential models. I must begin by mentioning my own parents. I remember how, even when we children were quite young, each morning my mother would withdraw from the hurly-burly of life to read her Bible and pray. In the years that I was growing up, my father, a Baptist minister, had his study in our home. Every morning we could hear him praying in that study. My father vocalized when he prayed—loudly enough that we knew he was praying, but not loudly enough that we could hear what he was saying. Every day he prayed, usually for about forty-five minutes. Perhaps there were times when he failed to do so, but I cannot think of one.

My father was a church planter in Quebec, in the difficult years when there was strong opposition, some of it brutal. Baptist ministers alone spent a total of eight years in jail between 1950 and 1952. Dad's congregations were not large; they were usually at the lower end of the two-digit range. On Sunday mornings after the eleven o'clock service, Dad would often play the piano and call his three children to join him in singing, while Mum completed the preparations for dinner. But one Sunday morning in the late fifties, I recall, Dad was not at the piano and was not to be found. I finally tracked him down. The door of his study was ajar. I pushed it open, and there he was, kneeling in front of his big chair, praying and quietly weeping. This time I could hear what he was saying. He was interceding with God on behalf of the handful of people to whom he had preached, and in particular for the conversion of a few who regularly attended but who had never trusted Christ Jesus.

In the ranks of ecclesiastical hierarchies, my father was not a great man. He never served a large church, never wrote a book, never discharged the duties of high denominational office. Doubtless his praying, too, embraced idioms and stylistic idiosyncrasies that should not be copied. But with great gratitude to God, I testify that my parents were not hypocrites. That is the worst possible heritage to leave with children: high spiritual pretensions and low performance. My parents were the opposite: few pretensions, and disciplined performance. What they prayed for were the important things, the things that congregate around the prayers of Scripture. And sometimes when I look at my own children, I wonder if, should the Lord give us another thirty years, they will remember their father as a man of prayer, or think of him as someone distant who was away from home rather a lot and who wrote a number of obscure books. That quiet reflection often helps me to order my days.

There have been many other models since the days of my youth. I can think of two women who in church prayer meetings invariably prayed with a great breadth of vision and a sense of utter reality, and above all with compelling compassion. They prayed in line with the truth of Scripture, but they prayed because they loved people. I remember the

prayers of some of the Christian leaders I have met through the World Evangelical Fellowship (as it was then called).

I remember some of the public prayers of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In particular, I recall how shamed I was when one of Lloyd-Jones's daughters told me some months before he died that her father had asked her to tell me that he prayed for me regularly. It was not as if I were within his inner circle of friends—and so I suddenly realized how extensive his prayer ministry must be and how deep his commitment to intercede for ministers of the gospel.

Choose models, but choose them well. Study their content, their breadth, their passion, their unction—but do not ape their idiom.

**5. Develop a system for your prayer lists.** It is difficult to pray faithfully for a large spread of people and concerns without developing prayer lists that help you remember them. These lists come in a variety of forms. Many denominations and mission agencies and even some large local churches publish their own prayer lists. These can be a considerable help to those with large interest in the particular organization; otherwise, they may seem a trifle remote. Despite its remoteness, there is one prayer list that offers a tremendous compensating advantage. The list to which I am referring is the publication *Operation World*,<sup>4</sup> which over the course of a year takes you around the world to country after country and region after region, and provides you with succinct, intelligent information to assist you in your prayers. Its value lies in its ability to enlarge your horizons, to expand your interest in the world church and the world's needs.

Many Christians who give themselves to prayer, however, find that, in addition to such published information, it is wise and fruitful to prepare their own lists. These come in many forms. Some are really a subset of journaling, briefly described earlier in this chapter. One approach to journaling involves writing down prayer requests on the left-hand side of a notebook, along with a date and relevant Scriptures, and answers on the right-hand side. This approach has the advantage of encouraging thoughtful, *specific* requests. General intercession, as important as it may be, cannot so easily be linked to specific answers.

Although I have sometimes adopted this and other forms for my prayer lists, the prayer-list pattern I followed for many years I adapted

from J. Herbert Kane, a veteran missionary to China (1935–50) and then a productive teacher of world mission. Apart from any printed guides I used, I kept a manila folder in my study, where I pray, and usually I took it with me when I was traveling. The first sheet in that folder was a list of people for whom I ought to pray regularly: they were bound up with me, with who I am. My wife headed the list, followed by my children and a number of relatives, followed in turn by a number of close friends in various parts of the world. The institutional names on that sheet included the local church of which we are a part, and the seminary where I now teach. Of course, exactly what I prayed for these people and institutions would vary from time to time as my perception of their needs changed (as my children grew older, for instance, or as a close friend faced a particular challenge in life or ministry), but the heart of my burden for these people was shaped, so far as I was able to shape it, by my grasp of what Scripture wants of us.

The second sheet in my folder listed short-range and intermediate-range concerns that would not remain there indefinitely. They included forthcoming responsibilities in ministry and various crises or opportunities that I heard about, often among Christians I scarcely knew. Either they were the sort of thing that would soon pass into history (like the project of writing this book!) or people or situations too remote for me to remember indefinitely. In other words, the first sheet focused on people for whom I prayed constantly; the second included people and situations for whom I might pray for a short or an extended period of time, but probably not indefinitely. The entries on the first sheet did not change, but their particular needs often did; the entries on the second sheet were largely shaped by short-term needs, and names and concerns were often added and deleted.

The next item in my manila folder was the list of the students in my spiritual formation group, my chaplaincy group—the students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for whom I was particularly responsible. This list included some notes on their background, academic program, families, personal concerns, and the like, and of course this list changed from year to year.



The rest of the folder was filled with letters—prayer letters, personal letters, occasionally independent notes with someone’s name at the top. These were filed in alphabetical order. When a new letter came in, I highlighted any matters in it that ought to be the subject of prayer, then filed it in the appropriate place in the folder. The letter it replaced was pulled out at the same time, with the result that the prayer folder was always up-to-date. I tried to set aside time to intercede with God on behalf of the people and situations represented by these letters, taking the one on the top, then the next one, and the next one, and so forth, putting the top ones, as I finished with them, at the bottom of the pile. Thus although the list was alphabetized, on any day a different letter of the alphabet might confront me.

I am not suggesting that this was the best system. It suited me, and I was happy with it. I needed to use it more, not enlarge it more. The system was flexible, always up-to-date, expandable; above all, it helped me to pray. I told my students that if they wanted me to pray for them regularly after they graduated, they needed to write regular letters to me. Otherwise I would certainly forget most of them.

Eventually I changed the system. Instead of letters, more and more missionaries and former students and friends sent emails. For the longest time I printed them out and inserted them into the system. But now I am experimenting with digital lists, covering the same sort of material, a file that includes my regular responsibilities in prayer and into which I can file emailed letters. But I have not yet discarded the old system, since some folk still send me paper letters. Doubtless I’ll get this sorted some day!

Whatever the system, however, use prayer lists. All of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down, except on our prayer lists.

**6. Mingle praise, confession, and intercession, but when you intercede, try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture.** Both theoretical and practical considerations underlie this advice.

The theoretical considerations can best be set out by mentally conjuring up two extremes. The first judges it inappropriate to ask God for things. Surely he is sovereign: he does not need our counsel. If he is the

one “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11), surely it is a bit cheeky to badger him for things. He does not change the course of the universe because some finite, ignorant, and sinful human being asks him to. The appropriate response to him, surely, is worship. We should worship him for what he is and does. Because we so frequently skirt his ways, we should be ready to confess our sin. But to bring him our petitions is surely to misrepresent where true piety lies. Godliness rests in submission to the Almighty’s will, not in intercession that seeks to change that will. Petitionary prayer can therefore be dismissed as at best an impertinence, at worst a desperate insult to the sovereign and holy God. Besides, if God is really sovereign, he is going to do whatever he wants to do, whether or not he is asked to do it. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is thinking in much the same way as a Muslim: the right approach to God binds you to a kind of theological determinism, not to say fatalism.

The second extreme begins with the slogan, “Prayer changes things.” Petitionary prayer is everything. This means that if people die and go to hell, it is because you or I or someone has neglected to pray. Does not Scripture say, “You do not have because you do not ask God” (James 4:2)? Worship and confession must of course be allotted an appropriate part, but they can reduce to mere self-gratification: it can be fun to worship, a relief to confess your sins. Real work for God, however, demands that we wrestle with God, and cry, with Jacob, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). Not to intercede is to flee from your responsibilities as a Christian. Far from being an insult to God, petitionary prayer honors him because he is a God who likes to give his blessings in response to the intercession of his people. In fact, if you agonize in your prayers, fast much, plead the name of Jesus, and spend untold hours at this business of intercession, you cannot help but call down from heaven a vast array of blessings. Of course, if a Christian adopts this line, he or she is in danger of treating prayer much like magic: the right incantations over the longest period of time produce the desired effect.

On the face of it, neither of these extremes captures the balance of biblical prayers, and both of them are reductionistic in their treatment

of God. I shall return to this question at greater length in chapters 9 and 10. Anticipating the argument there, we must remember that the Bible simultaneously pictures God as utterly sovereign, and as a prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. Unless we perceive this and learn how to act on these simultaneous truths, not only will our views of God be distorted, but our praying is likely to wobble back and forth between a resigned fatalism that asks for nothing and a badgering desperation that exhibits little real trust.

Even a little reflective acquaintance with the God of the Bible acknowledges that he is not less than utterly sovereign, and not less than personal and responsive. Correspondingly, the Bible boasts many examples of praise and adoration, and no fewer examples of intercession. Indeed, “Christian prayer is marked decisively by petition, because this form of prayer discloses the true state of affairs. It reminds the believer that God is the source of all good, and that human beings are utterly dependent and stand in need of everything.”<sup>5</sup>

Of the various models that usefully capture both of these poles, the model of a personal relationship with a father is as helpful as any. If a boy asks his father for several things, all within the father’s power to give, the father may give him one of them right away, delay giving him another, decline to give him a third, set up a condition for a fourth. The child is not assured of receiving something because he has used the right incantation; that would be magic. The father may decline to give something because he knows it is not in the child’s best interests. He may delay giving something else because he knows that so many requests from his young son are temporary and whimsical. He may also withhold something that he knows the child needs until the child asks for it in an appropriate way. But above all, the wise father is more interested in a relationship with his son than in merely giving him things. Giving him things constitutes part of that relationship but certainly not all of it. The father and son may enjoy simply going out for walks together. Often the son will talk with his father not to obtain something, or even to find out something, but simply because he likes to be with him.

None of these analogies is perfect, of course. But it is exceedingly important to remember that prayer is not magic and that God is personal

as well as sovereign. There is more to praying than asking, but any sustained prayer to the God of the Bible will certainly include asking. And because we slide so easily into sinful self-centeredness, we must approach this holy God with contrition and confession of our sins. On other occasions we will focus on his love and forbearance, on the sheer splendor of his being, and approach him with joy and exuberant praise. The rich mixture of approaches to God mirrored in Scripture must be taken over into our own lives. This rich mixture is, finally, nothing more than a reflection of the many different components of the kind of relationship we ought to have with the God of the Bible.

In addition to these “theoretical” considerations (as I have called them), there are some intensely practical questions. If the one to whom we pray is the sort of God I have just portrayed, then when we ask him for things, when we intercede with him, we must not think either in fatalistic terms or in terms of magic. Rather, we must think in personal and relational categories. We ask our heavenly Father for things because he has determined that many blessings will come to us only through prayer. Prayer is his ordained means of conveying his blessings to his people. That means we must pray according to his will, in line with his values, in conformity with his own character and purposes, claiming his own promises. Practically speaking, *how do we do that?*

Where shall we learn the will of God, the values of God, the character and purposes of God, the promises of God? We shall learn such things in the Scriptures he has graciously given us. But that means that when we pray, when we ask God for things, we must try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture. That is an immensely *practical* step.

Elsewhere I have told of my first hesitant experiences along these lines.<sup>6</sup> They began with the pastor who took me aside on Monday nights and began to teach me to pray. I shall not repeat the account of those first experiences here. From him, however, I learned that one of the most important elements in intercession is to think through, in the light of Scripture, what it is God wants us to ask for.

That is not a superficial question, and the answers are rarely easy to come by. Thoughtful, balanced answers depend on a growing grasp of just what the Bible says in its parts and as a whole. For example, what,

precisely, should we be praying for with respect to each member of our family—and why? Someone close to us contracts a terminal disease: what should we pray for, and why? For healing? For freedom from pain? For faith and perseverance? For acceptance of what has befallen? And would it make a difference if the person in question were seventy-five years of age as opposed to twenty-nine? Why or why not? Are there some things we may humbly request from God, and others we should boldly claim? If so, what kinds of things fall into each category?

A very useful book could be written on this subject, provided it were written by someone not only learned in the Scriptures but also schooled in years of prayer. No matter how well done, such a book would have a lot of loose ends, precisely because effective prayer is the fruit of a relationship with God, not a technique for acquiring blessings. Besides, there are countless situations in which we simply do not know what to pray for. Then the Christian who is diligent at prayer learns what Paul means when he writes that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom. 8:26–27). When we pray, our intercessions may be off the mark; on many matters we do not know the Scriptures well enough, we do not know God well enough, to be confident about what we should be praying. But the Holy Spirit helps us by interceding for us with unuttered groanings offered to the Father while we Christians are praying.<sup>7</sup>

We must frankly admit that the task of tying as many petitions as possible to the Scriptures is challenging. Christians who grow in their ability to do this will learn that there are countless situations in prayer where we must simply rely on the Holy Spirit to intercede on our behalf. But having conceded these points—indeed, having insisted on them—it is essential to pursue this discipline. How else shall we learn what our heavenly Father wants, what he expects us to ask for, and why, and how to approach him?

**7. If you are in any form of spiritual leadership, work at your public prayers.** It does not matter whether the form of spiritual leadership

you exercise is the teaching of a Sunday school class, pastoral ministry, small-group evangelism, or anything else: if at any point you pray in public as a leader, then work at your public prayers.

Some people think this advice distinctly corrupt. It smells too much of public relations, of concern for public image. After all, whether we are praying in private or in public, we are praying to God. Surely he is the one we should be thinking about, and no one else.

This objection misses the point. Certainly if we must choose between trying to please God in prayer and trying to please our fellow creatures, we must unhesitatingly opt for the former. But that is not the issue. It is a question not of pleasing our human hearers but of instructing them and edifying them.

The ultimate sanction for this approach is none less than Jesus himself. At the tomb of Lazarus, after the stone has been removed, Jesus looks to heaven and prays, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41–42). Here, then, is a prayer of Jesus himself that is shaped in part by his awareness of what his human audience needs to hear.

The point is that although public prayer is addressed to God, it is addressed to God while others are overhearing it. Of course, if the one who is praying is more concerned to impress these human hearers than to pray to God, then rank hypocrisy takes over. That is why Jesus so roundly condemns much of the public praying of his day and insists on the primacy of private prayer (Matt. 6:5–8). But that does not mean there is no place at all for public prayer. Rather, it means that public prayer ought to be the overflow of one’s private praying. And then, judging by the example of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, there is ample reason to reflect on just what my prayer, rightly directed to God, is saying to the people who hear me.

In brief, public praying is a pedagogical opportunity. It provides the one who is praying with an opportunity to instruct or encourage or edify all who hear the prayer. In liturgical churches, many of the prayers are well crafted, but to some ears they lack spontaneity. In nonliturgical churches, many of the prayers are so predictable that they are scarcely

any more spontaneous than written prayers, and most of them are not nearly as well crafted. The answer to both situations is to provide more prayers that are carefully and freshly prepared. That does not necessarily mean writing them out verbatim (though that can be a good thing to do). At the least, it means thinking through in advance and in some detail just where the prayer is going, preparing, perhaps, some notes, and memorizing them.

Public praying is a responsibility as well as a privilege. In the last century, the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon did not mind sharing his pulpit: others sometimes preached in his home church even when he was present. But when he came to the “pastoral prayer,” if he was present, he reserved that part of the service for himself. This decision did not arise out of any priestly conviction that his prayers were more efficacious than those of others. Rather, it arose from his love for his people, his high view of prayer, his conviction that public praying should not only intercede with God but also instruct and edify and encourage the saints.

Many facets of Christian discipleship, not least prayer, are rather more effectively passed on by modeling than by formal teaching. Good praying is more easily caught than taught. If it is right to say that we should choose models from whom we can learn, then the obverse truth is that we ourselves become responsible to become models for others. So whether you are leading a service or family prayers, whether you are praying in a small-group Bible study or at a convention, work at your public prayers.

**8. Pray until you pray.** That is Puritan advice. It does not simply mean that persistence should mark much of our praying—though admittedly that is a point the Scriptures repeatedly make. Even though he was praying in line with God’s promises, Elijah prayed for rain seven times before the first cloud appeared in the heavens. The Lord Jesus told parables urging persistence in prayer (Luke 11:5–13). If some generations need to learn that God is not particularly impressed by long-winded prayers, and is not more disposed to help us just because we are garrulous, our generation needs to learn that God is not impressed by the kind of brevity that is nothing other than culpable negligence. He is not more disposed to help us because our insincerity and spiritual flightiness

conspire to keep our prayers brief. Our generation certainly needs to learn something more about persistence in prayer, and to that point I shall return in a later chapter.

Even so, that is not quite what the Puritans meant when they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray.” What they meant is that Christians should pray long enough and honestly enough, at a single session, to get past the feeling of formalism and unreality that attends not a little praying. We are especially prone to such feelings when we pray for only a few minutes, rushing to be done with a mere duty. To enter the spirit of prayer, we must stick to it for a while. If we “pray until we pray,” eventually we come to delight in God’s presence, to rest in his love, to cherish his will. Even in dark or agonized praying, we somehow know we are doing business with God. In short, we discover a little of what Jude means when he exhorts his readers to pray “in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20)—which presumably means it is treacherously possible to pray *not* in the Spirit.

Something of the same perspective is presupposed in an anonymous poem that C. S. Lewis quotes:

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem  
To be in speech with you,  
Since but one voice is heard, it’s all a dream  
One talker aping two.

Sometimes it is, yet not as they  
Conceive. Rather, I  
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say,  
But lo!, my wells are dry.

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake  
The listener’s role and through  
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake  
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply  
Nor can; thus, while we seem  
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I  
No dreamer, but thy dream.<sup>8</sup>



As Lewis comments, this “dream” language smacks rather too much of pantheism “and was perhaps dragged in for the rhyme.”<sup>9</sup> Doubtless the anonymous author is a better poet than theologian. But there is something important here just the same. If God is the one “who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13), then of course he is the God who by his Spirit helps us in our praying. Every Christian who has learned the rudiments of praying knows by experience at least a little of what this means. The Puritans knew a great deal of it. That is why they exhorted one another to “pray until you pray.” Such advice is not to become an excuse for a new legalism; there are startling examples of very short, rapid prayers in the Bible (e.g., Neh. 2:4). But in the Western world we urgently need this advice, for many of us in our praying are like nasty little boys who ring front doorbells and run away before anyone answers.

Pray until you pray.

These, then, are some of the lessons I have learned from other Christians. But I would not for a moment want to leave the impression that they constitute a rule, a litmus test, still less a “how-to” manual. The words of J. I. Packer in this regard are worth pondering:

I start with the truism that each Christian’s prayer life, like every good marriage, has in it common factors about which one can generalize and also uniquenesses which no other Christian’s prayer life will quite match. You are you, and I am I, and we must each find our own way with God, and there is no recipe for prayer that can work for us like a handyman’s do-it-yourself manual or a cookery book, where the claim is that if you follow the instructions you can’t go wrong. Praying is not like carpentry or cookery; it is the active exercise of a personal relationship, a kind of friendship, with the living God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the way it goes is more under divine control than under ours. Books on praying, like marriage manuals, are not to be treated with slavish superstition, as if perfection of technique is the answer to all difficulties; their purpose, rather, is to suggest things to try. But as in other close relationships, so in prayer: you have to find out by trial and error what is right for you, and you learn to pray by praying. Some of us talk more, others less; some

are constantly vocal, others cultivate silence before God as their way of adoration; some slip into glossolalia, others make a point of not slipping into it; yet we may all be praying as God means us to do. The only rules are, stay within biblical guidelines and within those guidelines, as John Chapman puts it, “pray as you can and don’t try to pray as you can’t.”<sup>10</sup>

### Questions for Review and Reflection

1. List the positive and negative things you have learned about praying by listening to others pray.
2. List practical ways in which you will commit yourself to improve your prayer life during the next six months.
3. What do Christian preachers and teachers mean when they encourage us to “meditate prayerfully on the Word of God”?