



METHOD FOR PRAYER







METHOD FOR PRAYER

Freedom in the face of God



Matthew Henry

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE



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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), beloved commentator on the Scriptures, was born near Whitchurch (Salop), England.¹ He began preaching at the age of 23 and spent most of his ministry as pastor of a church in Chester (1687-1712). He was a prolific writer, most famous for his *Commentary on the Whole Bible* which he began in November of 1704 and left incomplete upon his death. Ministerial colleagues concluded the work with reference to his notes and writings (Henry had finished the commentary from Genesis through Acts).

Throughout his life as a minister, Henry was a diligent student of the word, sometimes rising as early as 4 o'clock in the morning and often spending eight hours a day in his study in addition to his pastoral labors. He was also, however, a man of prayer. His life-long concern for prayer is said to have originated with his recovery from a potentially terminal illness at the age of 10. Whatever the case, the whole of his labors is marked by the wisdom which only those who are habitually dependent upon the Almighty in prayer may hope to attain.

Henry completed a book on prayer in March of 1712, just two months before leaving Chester (where he had served for twenty-five years) to pastor a church in London. Hence, it reflects a lifetime of prayer, ministry and Christian experience. Its full title was *A Method for Prayer with Scripture Expressions proper to be used under each head*. In it, Henry lays down an outline of a plan for prayer (Adoration, Confession, Petition, Thanksgiving, Intercession, and Conclusion) and supplies the contents of prayer from the Scriptures themselves.

The editor's acquaintance with Matthew Henry's book on prayer dates to a suggestion of one of his seminary professors, O. Palmer Robertson. Some of the students, appreciative of Dr. Robertson's peculiar power in public prayer, inquired as to what he would suggest to us for becoming more proficient in leading in congregational prayer. Beside the cultivation of the habit of regular private prayer, he recommended one book: Matthew Henry's *Method for Prayer*.

¹ For those unfamiliar with English geography, Whitchurch (Salop) is about 18 miles south, south-east of Chester, not too far from the border with Wales, and located in the area today known as Shropshire.



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A Press, Inc. of Greenville, South Carolina, USA, eventually reprinted a copy of the 1819, Berwick edition. Having recommended the book to many friends who greatly benefitted from their reading of *Method for Prayer*, it seemed appropriate to prepare the book for reintroduction to the broader Christian community. Various editions were compared, in the process of which numerous errors were discovered. And since the most recent editions of the work were typeset in the nineteenth century, it was decided to completely re-typeset and edit the volume. Henry's numbering system for the outline has been modified to make it easier to follow. A few footnotes have been added. Incorrect Scripture references have been rectified. Latin and Greek phrases have been translated. Three of Henry's sermons on prayer have been included. And three appendices by the editor have been attached.

The aim of the republication of this old work is to assist and encourage modern Christians in both public and private prayer. Surely we all recognize that the Church of our day, at least in the West, is weak in the way of prayer. Few of us, perhaps, understand what prayer really is. We do not pray often. We do not pray with Scriptural proportion, nor does our prayer much reflect the language and thought of the Bible. We do not pray fervently. Maybe we really do not believe in prayer.

Resorting to a more Scriptural pattern of prayer may be a simple (but profound) answer to many problems in our practice of prayer. Praying Scripturally will teach us what prayer is, even while we do it. It will correct 'shopping list' views of prayer which abound in the Christian community. It will begin to solve in our own minds the question of 'unanswered prayer'. It will remind us of just how much there is to pray about day by day. It will teach us of the extreme urgency of prayer. It will return proportion to prayers long on petition, but short on adoration, confession, and thanksgiving. It will instruct us how best to pray for ministers, missionaries, and one another. It will show us the proper way to approach God in prayer. It will remind us of the good things that God does for us (which we, more often than not, take for granted). It will remind us to always give thanks to God (which, paradoxically, is so important for our own assurance of His faithfulness in answering prayer). It will begin to engrave in our minds Biblical patterns of thought which can help immunize us from the enticing folly of the world's



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view of life. It will force us to rehearse the solemn warnings and precious promises of God (which will do eternal good to our souls). And it will move us from our inherent man-centeredness in prayer to a Biblical, God-centered way of praying.

For those who are called upon to lead the Church in public prayer, or who simply desire to be more faithful and competent in their own private petitions, a Scriptural manner of praying provides the order, proportion, and variety which should characterize all our prayers. We have attached a number of helps to assist the reader in achieving this end. Part one of this volume contains the entire text of Matthew Henry's *Method for Prayer*. Reading and re-reading through it will train the Christian in the use of Biblical truth and language in prayer. Part two comprises three of Henry's sermons on prayer given shortly after Henry had arrived in London, in late August and early September of 1712. They concern how a Christian may start, spend, and close the day in prayer. They are included as an encouragement to regular private devotions. Finally, we have affixed three appendices. The first is a complete outline of Henry's plan for prayer. The reader may find it helpful to refer to in calling to mind subject matter for prayer. The second provides some guidelines for public prayer, drawn from Samuel Miller's excellent book, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*.² It is designed to help those who pray in public regularly or occasionally better prepare themselves for the task. The final appendix is an abbreviated version of Henry's outline, designed to be referred to at one's convenience.

My thanks to my student assistants, Michael Andres, Rob Bailey, David Mikkelson, and Scott Moore, for their help in the task of editing, and to my youngest brother, Melton Ledford Duncan, and my mother, Shirley Duncan, who did the proof-reading. My appreciation is also extended to Christian Focus Publications for their interest in the project and willingness to bring it to fruition.

Ligon Duncan
Jackson, Mississippi
June 1993

² Miller's book is highly recommended and may be obtained from Sprinkle Publications, P.O. Box 1094, Harrisonburg, VA, 22801.





To The READER

Religion is so much the business of our lives, and the worship of God so much the business of our religion, that what hath a sincere intention, and probable tendency, to promote and assist the acts of religious worship, I think, cannot be unacceptable to any that heartily wish well to the interests of God's kingdom among men: For if we have spiritual senses exercised, true devotion, that aspiring flame of pious affections to God, as far as in a judgment of charity we discern it in *others* (though in different shapes and dresses, which may seem *uncouth* to one another) cannot but appear *beautiful and amiable*, and as far as we feel it in *our own breasts*, cannot but be found very *pleasant and comfortable*.

Prayer is a principal branch of religious worship, which we are moved to by the very light of nature, and obliged to by some of its fundamental laws. *Pythagoras'* golden verses begin with this precept, Whatever men made a God of, they prayed to, *Deliver me, for thou art my God* (Isa. 44: 17). Nay, whatever they prayed to they made a God of — *Deos qui rogat ille facit*.¹ It is a piece of respect and homage so exactly consonant to the natural ideas which all men have of God, that it is certain those that *live without prayer, live without God in the world*.

Prayer is the solemn and religious offering up of devout acknowledgments and desires to God, or a sincere representation of holy affections, with a design to give unto God the glory due unto his Name thereby, and to obtain from him promised favours, and both through the Mediator. Our *English* word *Prayer* is too strait, for that properly signifies *Petition, or Request*; whereas humble adorations of God, and thanksgivings to him, are as necessary in Prayer, as any other part of it. The *Greek* word means a *Vow directed to God*. The *Latin* word *Votum* is used for Prayer: *Jonah's* mariners with their sacrifices *made vows*; for prayer is to *move* and *oblige* ourselves, not to *move or oblige* God.

Clement of Alexandria (in *The Stromata*, 7, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, 534) calls Prayer (with an excuse for the boldness

1. An allusion to Pythagoras' Rules of Conduct; "Begin your work first having prayed for the Gods to accomplish it.



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of the expression) *conversing with God*: And it is the scope of a long discourse of his there, to shew that his *Believer* lives a life of communion with God, and so is praying always; that he studies by his prayers continually to converse with God. Some (saith he) had their stated hours of prayer, but he *prays all his life long*. The scripture describes prayer to be our *drawing near to God, lifting up our souls* to him, *pouring out our hearts* before him.

This is the life and soul of prayer; but this soul in the present state must have a body, and that body must be such as becomes the soul, and is suited and adapted to it. Some words there must be of the mind at least, in which as in the smoke, this incense must ascend; not that God may *understand us*, for our *thoughts afar off* are known to him, but that we may the better *understand ourselves*.

A golden thread of heart-prayer must run through the web of the whole Christian life; we must be frequently addressing ourselves to God in short and sudden *Ejaculations*, by which we must keep up our communion with God in providences and common actions, as well as in ordinances and religious services, Thus prayer must be *sparsim* (a sprinkling of it) in every duty, and *our Eyes* must be *ever towards the Lord*.

In *mental* prayer thoughts are words, and they are the *First-born* of the soul, which are to be consecrated to God. But if when we pray alone we see cause for the better fixing of our minds, and exciting of our devotions, to clothe our conceptions with words; if the conceptions be the genuine products of the new nature, one would think words should not be far to seek. Nay, if the *groanings* be such *as cannot be uttered*, he *that searcheth the heart* knows them to be *the mind of the Spirit*, and will accept of them (Rom. 8:26, 27) and answer the *Voice of our breathing* (Lam. 3:56). Yet through the infirmity of the flesh, and the aptness of our hearts to wander and trifle, it is often necessary that words should go *first*, and be kept in mind for the directing and exciting of devout actions, and in order thereunto, the assistance here offered I hope will be of some use.

When we join with others in prayer, who are our mouth to God, our minds must attend *them*, by an intelligent believing concurrence with that which is the sense and scope, and substance of what they say, and affections working in us suitable thereunto: And this the scripture directs us to signify, by saying *Amen*, mentally if not vocally, *at their giving of Thanks* (I Cor. 14:16). And as far as our



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joining with them will permit, we may intermix pious ejaculations of our own, with their addresses, provided they be pertinent, that not the least fragment of praying time may be lost.

But he that is the mouth of others in prayer, whether in public or private, and therein useth that *freedom of speech*, that holy liberty of prayer which is allowed us (and which we are sure many good Christians have found by experience to be very comfortable and advantageous in this duty) ought not only to consult the workings of his own heart (though them principally, as putting most life and spirit into the performance) but the edification also of those that join with him; and both in matter and words should have an eye to that; and for service in that case I principally design this endeavour.

That bright ornament of the Church, the learned Dr. *Wilkins*, bishop of *Chester*, hath left us an excellent performance much of the same nature with this, in his *discourse concerning the gift of prayer*; which, some may think, makes this of mine unnecessary: But the multiplying of books of devotion is what few serious Christians will complain of: And as on the one hand I am sure those that have *this* poor essay of mine will still find great advantage by *that*; so on the other hand I think those who have *that* may yet find some further assistance by *this*.

It is desirable that our prayers should be *copious* and *full*; our burthens, cares, and wants are many, so are our sins and mercies. The promises are numerous and very rich, our God gives liberally, and hath bid us *open our mouths wide*, and he will *fill them*, will *satisfy them with good things*.

We are not straitened in him, why then should we be stinted and straitened in our own bosoms! Christ had taught his disciples the Lord's prayer, and yet tells them (John 16:24) that *hitherto they had asked nothing*, *i.e.* nothing in comparison with what they should ask when the *Spirit* should be *poured out*, to *abide* with the church *for ever*; and they should *see greater things than these*. Then *ask*, and *ye shall receive*, that *your joy may be full*. We are encouraged to be *particular* in prayer, and in *every thing to make our requests known to God*, as we ought also to be particular in the adoration of the divine perfections, in the confession of our sins, and our thankful acknowledgments of God's mercies.

But since at the same time we cannot go over the tenth part of the particulars which are fit to be the matter of prayer, without making the duty burthensome to the flesh which is weak, even where the



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spirit is willing (an extreme which ought carefully to be avoided) and without danger of intrenching upon other religious exercises, it will be requisite that what is but *briefly touched upon* at one time, should be *enlarged upon* at another time: And herein this storehouse of materials for prayer may be of use to put us in remembrance of our several errands at the throne of grace, that none may be quite forgotten.

And it is requisite to the decent performance of the duty, that some proper *method* be observed, not only that what is said be *good*, but that it be said in its proper place and time; and that we offer not any thing to the glorious Majesty of heaven and earth, which is confused, impertinent, and indigested. Care must be taken, than more than ever, that we be not *rash with our mouth, nor hasty to utter any thing before God*; that we say not what comes uppermost, nor use such repetitions as evidence not the fervency, but the barrenness and slightness of our spirits; but that the matters we are dealing with God about being of such vast importance, we observe a decorum in our words, that they be well chosen, well weighed, and well placed.

And as it is good to be *methodical* in prayer, so it is good to be *sententious*: The Lord's prayer is remarkably so; and *David's* psalms, and many of *St. Paul's* prayers which we have in his epistles: We must consider that the greatest part of those that join with us in prayer will be in danger of losing or mistaking the sense, if the period be long, and the parenthesis many, and in this as in other things, they that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak: *Jacob* must lead as the children and flock can follow.

As to the words and expressions we use in prayer, though I have here in my enlargements upon the several heads of prayer confined myself almost wholly to scripture language, because I would give an instance of the sufficiency of the scripture to furnish us for every good work, yet I am far from thinking but that it is convenient and often necessary to use other expressions in prayer besides those that are purely scriptural; only I would advise that the *sacred* dialect be most used, and made familiar to us and others in our dealing about *sacred* things; that language Christian people are most accustomed to, most affected with, and will most readily agree to; and where the scriptures are opened and explained to the people in the ministry of the word, scripture language will be most intelligible, and the sense of it best apprehended. This is *sound speech that cannot be condemned*. And those that are able to do it may do well to enlarge



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by way of descant or paraphrase upon the scriptures they make use of; still speaking according to that rule, and comparing spiritual things with spiritual, that they may illustrate each other.

And it is not to be reckoned a perverting of scripture, but is agreeable to the usage of many divines, especially the Fathers, and I think is warranted by divers quotations in the New Testament out of the Old, to *allude* to a scripture phrase, and to make use of it by way of accommodation to another sense than what was the first intendment of it, provided it agree with the analogy of faith. As for instance, those words, (Ps. 87:7), *All my springs are in thee*, may very fitly be applied to God, though there it appears by the feminine article in the original, to be meant of *Sion*; nor has it ever been thought any wrong to the scripture phrase, to pray for the blessings of *the upper springs and the nether springs*, though the expression from whence it is borrowed (Judg. 1:15). hath no reference at all to what we mean; but by common use every one knows the signification, and many are pleased with the significancy of it.

Divers heads of prayer may no doubt be added to those which I have here put together, and many scripture expressions too, under each head (for I have only set down such as first occurred to my thoughts) and many other expressions too, not in scripture words, which may be very comprehensive and emphatical, and apt to excite devotion. And perhaps those who covet earnestly this excellent gift, and covet to excel in it, may find it of use to them to have such a book as this interleaved, in which to insert such other heads and expressions as they think will be most agreeable to them, and are wanting here.

And though I have here recommended a good method for prayer, and that which has been generally approved, yet I am far from thinking we should always tie ourselves to it; that may be varied as well as the expression: Thanksgiving may very aptly be put some-times before confession or petition, or our intercessions for others before our petitions for ourselves, as in the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes one of these parts of prayer may be enlarged upon much more than another; or they may be decently interwoven in some other method; *Ars est celaree artem.*²

There are those (I doubt not) who at some times have their hearts so wonderfully elevated and enlarged in prayer, above themselves; at

2. The quote is from Ovid, *The Art of Love*. It reads literally: 'it is art to conceal art.' Henry thus warns that whatever form of prayer we choose, method should not attract attention to itself and thus detract from the content of prayer.



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other times, such a fixedness and fulness of thought, such a fervour of pious and devout affections, the product of which is such a fluency and variety of pertinent and moving expressions, and in such a just and natural method, that then to have an eye to such a scheme as this, would be a hindrance to them, and would be in danger to cramp and straiten them: If the *Heart* be full of its *good matter*, it may make *the tongue as the pen of a ready Writer*. But this is a case that rarely happens, and ordinarily there is need of proposing to ourselves a certain method to go by in prayer, that the service may be performed decently and in order; in which yet one would avoid that which looks too formal. A man may write straight without having his paper ruled.

Some few forms of Prayer I have added in the last Chapter, for the use of those who need such helps, and that know not how to do as well or better without them; and therefore I have calculated them for families. If any think them too long, let them observe that they are divided into many paragraphs, and those mostly independent, so that when brevity is necessary some paragraphs may be omitted.

But after all, the intention and close application of the mind, the lively exercises of Faith and Love, and the outgoings of holy desire towards God, are so essentially necessary to Prayer, that without these in sincerity, the best and most proper language is but a lifeless image. If we had the tongue of men and angels, and have not the heart of humble serious Christians in Prayer, we are but as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. It is only the *effectual fervent prayer*, the *in-wrought in-laid* Prayer that *avails much*. Thus therefore we ought to approve ourselves to God in the integrity of our hearts, whether we pray by, or without a pre-composed Form.

When I had finished the third Volume of Expositions of the Bible, which is now in the press; before I proceed, as I intend, in an humble dependence on the divine Providence and Grace, to the fourth volume, I was willing to take a little time from that work to this poor performance, in hopes it might be of some service to the generation of them that seek God, that seek the face of the God of *Jacob*: And if any good Christians receive assistance from it in their devotions, I hope they will not deny me one request, which is, that they will pray for me, that I may obtain mercy of the Lord to be found among the faithful watchmen on *Jerusalem's* walls, who never hold their peace day or night, but give themselves to the word and prayer, that at length I may finish my course with joy.