

MCBC WHETSTONE CONFERENCE 2018

INCREASING INTIMACY WITH GOD IN PRAYER

Layton Talbert

BOOKS

This is a very subjective list of just a few of the books I have personally most connected with or found most helpful.

Expositional

- D. A. Carson's *Call to Spiritual Reformation* Recently retitled *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*
 - excellent expositional treatment of Paul's prayers
- David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A NT Theology of Petitionary Prayer*
 - especially helpful on Luke 11 and 18

Theological

- Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*
 - refreshing, distinctive approach; I don't agree with all his conclusions

Devotional

- Paul Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*
- J. I. Packer & Carol Nystrom, *Praying: Finding Our Way through Duty to Delight* (mixed)
 - this is one of the texts for my class; some aspects are really good, the disappointing ones become good teaching moments in class

Biographical

- Andrew Bonar, *Diary & Life*
 - highlight all his references to prayer; his struggles and frustrations are at least as encouraging as his successes

Practical

- Donald Whitney, *Praying the Bible*
 - offers some refreshing strategies for incorporating the Bible into your praying
- *Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*
 - collection of topically-arranged prayers that are spiritually mature, Scripturally saturated, and profoundly encouraging because they often wrestle with the same kinds of things I wrestle with before God in prayer.
 - most profound impact on my praying
 - I recommend the paperback so you can personalize the wording; value is not just in reading these prayers, but in personalizing them and praying them

PRACTICAL ENCOURAGEMENTS

Matthew 6—two remarkable things about this text. Here's the first: *This is the first place the Bible offers direct instruction on how to pray.* There are lots of instructive **examples** of prayer all over the OT. But never before *in Scripture* has anyone actually given specific instruction on how and what to pray. That's not to say that no one else ever did that.

In Luke 11, the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, *like John taught his disciples.* And in answering them, Jesus didn't say, "prayer isn't something you teach it's just something you do"; or "pray whatever/however you want because God knows your heart"; or "just rely on the Spirit to lead you in prayer." He gave them a model. He taught them *how* to pray: "When you pray, say this. Pray these kinds of things, and pray them this way." He then followed that with practical instructions and illustrations about prayer. Here is some uninspired but still helpful, practical instruction on prayer.

[Points adapted from Carson's, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, Ch. 1]

1. ***Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray.***

- Carson: "...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.... Unless we plan to pray we will not pray."
- "Unless I'm badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to.... And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut.... The natural unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality.... If you want renewal in your life of prayer you must plan to see it" (John Piper, *Desiring God*, pp. 150-151).

2. ***Adopt practical ways to impede mental drift.***

I appreciate Carson's candor here: "Am I the only Christian who has ever had problems with mental drift?" He offers several practical suggestions:

- "vocalize your prayers."
- "pray over the Scriptures."
- "adopt as models several biblical prayers."
- "pray through the worship sections of the better hymnals...."

3. ***Choose models—but choose them well.***

- "Most of us can improve our praying by carefully, thoughtfully listening to others pray. This does not mean that we should copy everything we hear."
- Good models "pray with great seriousness" and genuineness; "all of them use arguments and seek goals that are already portrayed in Scripture."
- "Study their content, their breadth, their passion, their unction—but do not ape their idiom."

The goal is *emulation*, not imitation. To be like, but not to merely copy. Of course, these models do not have to be living, personal models. There are lots of inspired prayer

models in Scripture; the last point mentioned that. There are also lots of good prayer models in theological literature, including books like *Valley of Vision*.

4. Try to tie as many requests as possible to Scripture.

Scripture is the ground of all our praying—our requests, our praises, our desires, our confessions, all need to be constantly informed and adjusted by God’s record of reality.

- Carson: *Avoid extremes: (1) an overemphasis on God’s sovereignty that diminishes the value and function of intercession, and (2) an overemphasis on “changing things through prayer” that diminishes the wisdom of God and treats prayer as almost a form of magic.*

5. Pray until you pray.

- *“That is Puritan advice.... 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.”*

But I’d suggest instead: **Pause until you pray.** Rather than beginning prayer without the engagement of heart or mind just to fill up the space with sound, pause—60 seconds, 2 minutes—until you have gathered your senses, your thoughts, your awareness, so that you are really ready in mind and spirit to pray meaningfully and feelingly. God doesn’t mind pauses. He is not impatiently tapping his anthropomorphic foot waiting for you to say something. That’s the gist of H. C. G. Moule’s counsel to younger men in the ministry:

“I ask my younger Brother, then, to keep sacred, with all his heart and will, an unhurried time alone with the Lord, night and morning at the least. I do not intrusively prescribe a length of time. But I do most earnestly say that the time, shorter or longer, must be deliberately spent; and even ten minutes can be spent deliberately, while mismanagement may give a feeling of haste to a much longer season. ... Do not, I beseech you, minimize the minutes; seek for such a fullness of “the Spirit of grace and of supplications,” (Zech 12:10) as shall draw you quite the other way. But if the time any given night or morning, must be short, let it nevertheless be a time of quiet, reverent, collected worship and confession and petition” (H.C.G. Moule, To My Younger Brethren in the Ministry).

6. Good theology and good exposition are not substitutes for personal prayer.

- Carson: *“I am scarcely in a position to criticize expository preaching and seminaries: I have given my life to such ministry. Yet I would be among the first to acknowledge that some students at the institution where I teach, and some faculty, too, can devote thousands of hours to the diligent study of Scripture and yet somehow display an extraordinarily shallow knowledge of God. Biblical knowledge can be merely academic and rigorous, but somehow not edifying, nor devout, nor guileless.... We need to know God better.... One of the foundational steps in knowing God...is prayer—spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer..... [Are we] better at theological articulation than spiritual adoration? Better—God help us!—at preaching than praying?” (D. A. Carson, research professor of NT at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers, 15-17).*

NATURE OF PRAYER

Raising the issue of the nature of prayer necessarily raises the question of definition. Here's a classic one from the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

This is probably the most historically famous definition of prayer in the last 300+ years. It is simple, memorable, succinct, portable, and covers *most* of our praying. My only quibble with it is that it seems to me to overlook the very dimension of prayer that I'm specifically focusing on in this presentation. It's a definition that does not seem to include as prayer passages like Ps. 8, 15, 23 (vv. 4-5), 32, 42, 45 (vv. 6-7), 48, 63, 65, 66, 67, 73, 76, 77, 92, 93, 94, 104, 131, 145. Many of these are occupied purely with praise; some are psalms of complaint, or questioning, or resolve. But none of these psalms offer up any requests to God at all; and yet they are clearly prayers—conversations with God, some of them *extended* conversations that occupy the entire psalm.

There is another definition of prayer—though not nearly so old. It provides a broader framework for the more specific catechism definition. It comes from a longtime classic Bible dictionary by Matthew George Easton:

Prayer is converse with God; the intercourse of the soul with God, not in contemplation or meditation, but in direct address to him. Prayer may be oral or mental, occasional or constant, ejaculatory or formal.

The descriptive definition continues, and just a cursory glance at it shows this is very much a *biblical theological description* of prayer, whereas the Catechism offers more of a *systematic theological definition* of prayer. Both have their place and their uses. But it's Easton's opening statement identifying the very essence of prayer as **converse with God** that I'm most interested in. That opening statement is clearly drawn from an older conception of the *conversational* nature of prayer, that shows up much earlier in the literature. Among other places, it shows up in Charles Hodge's *ST* (1865). Hodge adhered loyally to the WSC—yet he begins his discussion of different kinds of prayer with the statement that “prayer is converse with God.”

Granted, the language is a little bit dated; we'd say it more like this:

Prayer is conversation with God, the communion of the soul with God...in direct address to him.

But it's that conversational nature of prayer that I'm focusing on this morning. And by “conversational” I don't mean *laidback* or *irreverent* or *casual*. I mean *familiar, relational, personal* communication that covers all the same *kinds* of conversations we have with people we see and hear every day.

So when we talk about kinds of prayer, one way to go about identifying them would be to focus on the various words for prayer used in the Bible. But using vocabulary words as an organizational rubric for discussing kinds of prayer is prone to leave too much out. There are lots of prayers where a specific technical term for prayer doesn't even occur.

I want to propose another organizational approach by capitalizing on the basic premise that prayer is *conversation* with God. What kinds of conversation do we engage in with others who are, themselves, in the image of God? In conversation with another person I may express:

- appeal or wish, whether for myself or on behalf of another
- sorrow or apology
- love or admiration
- gratitude or appreciation
- hopes and joys, fears and doubts, questions and curiosities
- dissatisfaction or frustration

Extended conversation is often a mixture of several of these kinds of communication. But some conversations may focus spontaneously and exclusively on just one of these kinds of communication. All these can be broadly grouped under three major conversational categories:

- ***Entreaty (= Request)***
- ***Esteem (= Worship)***
- ***Fellowship (= Communion)***

When you correlate those kinds of conversation to prayer, it breaks down something like this:

I. Request

(1) **Supplication**—Arises out of a sense of need

(i) **Petition** (supplication for self)

- Genesis 15:1-3
- 1 Chr. 4:10
- Acts 4:29-30

(ii) **Intercession** (supplication for others)

- Genesis 18
- Exodus 32:11-14
- 1 Chr. 29:18-19
- Eph. 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12

(2) **Confession**—Arises out of an awareness of offense

- Judges 10:10, 15
- Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143
- Lam. 5
- Lk. 11:4; Lk. 18:13
- 1 Jn. 1:6-10

(3) **Imprecation**—Arises out of sanctified indignation

II. Worship

(4) **Adoration** (praise, doxology, admiration)

- 2 Sam. 7:18-29
- 1 Chr. 29:10-12
- Nehemiah 9:5-7

(5) **Thanksgiving**

- 1 Chr. 29:13-15
- Daniel 6:10
- Phil. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Timothy 2:1-2
- Hebrews 13:15

III. Communion

(6) **Fellowship**—conversing with God on any subject

- Exodus 33:18
- 1 Chr. 29:16-17
- Ps. 63; 73:18-28; 131; 139:1-22
- Jn. 17—mixes fellowship with petition and intercession
- Jn. 14:23; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; 1 Jn. 1:1-3, 6

(7) **Grievance**—one of the biblical words for this kind of prayer is “complaint,” not in the sense of disrespect or griping, but an utter frankness and transparency of soul before God that acknowledges where it is and what it feels. Examples are actually quite common in Scripture.

- Lam. 5:20
- Ps. 22:1; 77:4-9; 88:9-14
- Jer. 4:10; 20:7-8, 14-18
- Job 3 ff.
- Habakkuk
- Lk. 10:40
- Mk. 4:38
- Mt. 27:46
- Rev. 6:9-10

IV. Vow

- Could be an outgrowth of any form of prayer, but usually an extension of either *petition* or *adoration*
 - 1 Samuel 1:10-11
 - Ps. 132:1-5

That basic little review is primarily just to put into context one kind of prayer that I’m especially interested in this morning.

It is the concept of prayer as communion/fellowship that I especially want to commend as a means of increasing our intimacy with God in prayer. John writes that the apostles have declared what they themselves saw and heard so that we might share in their fellowship **with the Father and with the Son**. Fellowship is more than conversation; but there is no meaningful “fellowship” where there is no conversation.

James Stalker writes:

*In the prayers of those who pray most and best, petitions proper, I venture to say, occupy only an inconsiderable place. Much of prayer expresses the fullness of the soul rather than its emptiness.... Prayer at its best is ... conversation with God, the confidential talk of a child who tells everything to his father.... If this be what prayer is, it is not difficult to understand how the eternal Son should have prayed to the eternal Father (James Stalker, “Christ at Prayer” in *Imago Christi: The Example of Christ*).*

Stalker notes the example of the Confessions of St. Augustine, written “in the form of a prayer, from beginning to end; yet it narrates its author’s history and expounds his most important opinions. Evidently the good man had got into the habit of doing all his deepest thinking in the form of conversation with God.”

*“... Virtually everything David noticed about God, he prayed. Nothing in or about God was left on the shelf to be considered at a later time or to be brought up for discussion when there was leisure for it. God was personal and present and required response. . . . David knew nothing of God that he didn’t pray. In long retrospect over the Jewish and Christian centuries, it’s no exaggeration to say that anything we know about God that’s not prayed soon turns bad. The name of God without prayer to God is the stuff of blasphemy. . . . So-called theologians, whether amateur or professional, who don’t pray are in league with the devil. Indeed, the devil can be defined as that species of theologian who knows everything about God but will have nothing to do with him.” ~Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall**

One of the perpetual dangers of seminary—*not because of seminary, but because of our flesh*—one of the dangers of a pulpit or podium ministry, is to make God and theology, doctrine and Scripture, the *subject* of study but not the *object* of prayer. Study should be scholarship blended with fellowship and worship. Theological study should magnify God, not like a microscope magnifies something tiny, like the print of a systematic theology easily forgotten once closed and returned to the shelf, but like a telescope makes what appears small, because it’s so distant, loom large and magnificent and close, and which remains in view above and around us whenever we remove our eye from the magnifying device.

Here is one of my favorite prayer quotes, especially on this dimension of prayer as conversation:

“Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one’s heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you, tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them;

tell him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others. If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subjects of conversation.... Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.” ~Francois Fénelon

You’d never guess that comes from a 17th century French Catholic mystic who, interestingly had a profound influence on A. W. Tozer. You might ask, “Why are you quoting a Catholic on prayer?” My question is, “Why hasn’t a Baptist said this?” This is profoundly scriptural. The psalmists model this. Most of the prayers in *Valley of Vision* reflect this same spirit.

So what can you do to increase this sense of fellowship with God through prayer?

PRAYER EXERCISES

Here are some specific, Scriptural, targeted strategies that can help you pray freshly, more meaningfully, more satisfyingly and intimately, and more biblically. I call them “exercises” for lack of a better term (strategies? practices?); I hope that doesn’t make them sound tentative, or artificial, or anything less than real praying.

There are different kinds of physical exercises that target specific muscle groups to enhance specific skills and kinds of strength. Likewise, there are different kinds and ways of praying that target specific disciplines and aspects of our spirit—as well as different kinds of Scripture—and enhance our ability to pray more effectively and more meaningfully, by giving concentrated exposure to different kinds of Bible-centered praying.

It’s a helpful, wholesome, refreshing thing periodically to break out of regular patterns. Maybe once a week, maybe once a month, try dedicating your devotional time to one of these prayer exercises.

1. Thanksgiving Prayer

Spend a specific, significant, unbroken amount of time (30, 45, 60 minutes) in praise, adoration, and thanksgiving to the Lord—for His creation, attributes, gifts, preservation, drawing, salvation, provision, works, providences, trials, discipline . . . in short, for anything and everything that you can bring to mind. The challenge is to do this “unbrokenly”—i.e., unbroken in *time*, and unbroken by *any request*. You will probably find yourself habitually lapsing into a request within the first couple of minutes! I urge my students to stifle that habit for the purpose of this exercise, and to focus their spirit exclusively on God and His gifts, not your needs or desires.

Thanksgiving is a discipline of the thoughtful. Begin thanking Him for the most obvious things that come to your mind first: your breath, your health, your salvation. Not just “Thank you, Lord, for saving me” but think back to everything God did to draw you to Himself and persuade you to believe. Look around your room or house; think of the blessings of your family and home. Look out the window; think about all the pleasures, privileges, and provisions of life that God has given you the capacity to enjoy through your senses. Be practical. And be sincere. If 30 minutes sounds impossible to fill up with nothing but praise, you really need this exercise.

2. Narrative Prayer

Pray through a biblical narrative. I like to use this especially during special seasons—praying through one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death for Easter, or praying through an incarnation narrative during Christmas.

How do you do this? Basically, you read the passage to God—slowly, thoughtfully, aloud, and very consciously in God’s presence, in God’s hearing. Talk to Him about the events it records. Ask Him questions about the passage.

You are doing two things when you do this: (1) meditating on the passage, and (2) fellowshiping with the Lord over His words. It is a conscious exercise of the fellowship 1 John 1:3 mentions—a fellowship with God over a portion of His Word. You could call this *personal devotion*. Sometimes we divorce our Bible reading from our praying—a two-part religious practice. Don’t divorce them; keep them married. Fold them into one experience of fellowship with God. Not all the time, necessarily, but at least regularly for your *devotional* time. Rethink what “normal” devotions can be.

This, of course, doesn’t have to be linked to a season or a particular kind of narrative. The concept of talking to the Lord about what you are reading in Scripture, fellowshiping with God through a portion of His Word, is at the heart of several of these prayer exercises.

3. Doctrinal Prayer

This is the same practice, just with a different part of Scripture. Pray through a doctrinal passage, meditatively, phrase by phrase (e.g., Romans 6, 8; Ephesians 1, 2; Philippians 2; Colossians 1, 3). Read it to God, thank him for its truths, talk to him about its ramifications for you personally; turn it into prayer. Mentally handle the words and ponder the phrases. Again, ask God questions about the passage. (Lord, why did you say this? What do you mean by this? Why did you say that this way? What do I do with this?) The aim is to converse with God over His Word—not only to think His thoughts after Him, *but with Him*. Avoid commentaries and Study Bible notes; don’t let yourself get distracted by what men say about the passage; talk to God about the passage. Again, practice 1 Jn. 1:3—fellowship with God *over and through* His words.

Excursus on Meditation

These last two especially are forms of meditation. Miriam Champlin opens her little book on Bible meditation with a heretical-sounding statement:

the two devotional practices God commands believers to engage in regularly are not prayer and Bible reading, but prayer and Bible meditation.

She explains:

Stop and think about it. God never commands you to read your Bible every day. Most western Christians tend to believe that reading the Bible every day is one of the most basic fundamentals of Christian growth; but the Bible never says that. Why? Because for the vast majority of believers throughout history, that has been an impossibility. Most of them did not have a written copy of God's Word available to them, and many of them could not read.

For over 75% of church history the daily reading of God's Word has been an impossibility for 95% of God's people—whether because of *availability* of printed copies, or their *cost* and *accessibility*, or illiteracy. The printing press revolutionized human history; but the vast majority of history happened before the printing press. We are so accustomed to owning anything we want in print that it is easy to take our access to the Bible for granted, and to assume that *mere* reading is an adequate *substitute* for meditation. There is an important and necessary place for each, but the two are not the same thing. And the one the Bible repeatedly puts its finger on is *meditation*.

So this is in no way an attack on Bible *reading*. But it is a reminder that *reading is not an end; it is a means to an end*. The end—the goal of our exposure to God's Word—is *feeding & fellowship*. Did you know that the word “read” never occurs even once in the psalms? Not even in Psalm 119. What Scripture repeatedly both commends and commands (Josh. 1; 1 Tim. 4:15) is meditation because it reaches deeper into the heart than merely reading...or even studying...Scripture. (Cf. Ps. 1; 63:6; 77:12; 119:15; 119:97; 119:99; 119:148)

What is meditation? It's not rocket science, it's not esoteric, and it's not complicated.

Let me return for a moment to Miriam Champlin's book, *Constant Fellowship*:

*Meditation has multiple facets, but probably two major categories. First, meditation is an intentional focusing of your mind and heart on God and His Word. It is taking up individual truths about God as revealed in His Word, and turning those truths over in your mind, purposefully, **prayerfully**, repeatedly....*

One way to move in this direction is to keep your reading and your praying married to each other. If ***reading & praying*** is going to lead to ***feeding & fellowship***, these two should be combined. That's what a number of these prayer exercises do. Practice talking to God—fellowshipping with God—*while you read*. That's what the narrative and doctrinal prayer exercises are all about.

4. Epistolary Prayer

This is about praying the Bible's prayers—in this case, specifically some of Paul's prayers (e.g., Ephesians 1, 3; Philippians 1; Col. 1; 1 Thess. 1)—for yourself, or for someone else, phrase by phrase.

Pray through a passage like Colossians 1:9-12—or one of Paul's other prayers—for a family member, a friend, a missionary or church planter or for the believers in that church as a whole. *That's exactly what Paul is doing here.* Then send an email and let them know exactly what you prayed for them. *That's also what Paul is doing here.* Why did the Holy Spirit direct Paul to tell them how he was praying for them? What impact do you think it had when they found out exactly what he was praying for them? I think it would have been profoundly encouraging, but also sobering—prompting them to realign their own spiritual aims and priorities and prayers for themselves.

5. Reconciliational Prayer

This one has been really revolutionary and liberating for some. Can you think of someone who really annoys you? Someone who has wronged you in some way? Even sinned against you? Someone you have a hard time thinking Christlike thoughts about or toward. Have you ever tried praying *for* that person? I don't mean imprecatory prayer. I mean praying—specifically and extensively—for God's ministry to them and their family, for their spiritual success and growth in Christ, for God to be glorified in them. Isn't that what God ultimately wants for them?

Jesus taught, *Love your enemies, bless those that persecute you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you or persecute you; then you'll be like your Father in heaven.* Surely we're not supposed to pray that way only for unbelievers, but not for a brother or sister in Christ who has harmed or wronged us in some way.

Job had to do something like this for his three friends who had been falsely accusing him and abusing him (Job 42:7-10). After Job's confession of God's sovereignty and right to do anything He chooses (42:1-6), Job is right with God. Then God commands Eliphaz and his two friends to approach him *through Job*, "and my servant Job will pray for you" (42:8). And he did. And 42:10 specifically says that God restored his blessing on Job *after he prayed for God to accept his three friends*. Kidner comments that this command from God "led Job out of the imprisonment of self-preoccupation, and out of the deadlock of invective. Here was no arbitrary demand."

If you have a bitter or unforgiving spirit, this can transform the way you think about that person, and about yourself, and about God. To pray for those who have wronged you is a mark of humility, maturity, and Christlikeness.

6. Prophetic Prayer

This is about praying through a prophetic portion of Scripture and participating in its fulfillment by asking God to bring to pass the things he has promised.

For example, Isaiah 60-61 details a litany of astounding reversals that God has sworn to accomplish in and for Israel, for His own glory. Isaiah 62 applies those promises this way:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning..... On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind the LORD, take no rest for yourselves; And give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

I deal with this passage and others in more detail in a chapter on “Prayer and Providence” in my book *Not by Chance*. God has ordained that He will accomplish His purposes through the prayers of His people. You have the same weaving together of prayer and prophecy in passages like Ezek. 36, Zech. 12; even Matt. 6, where Christ instructs us to pray “Thy kingdom come.” It is one of the ways we “hasten the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12).

This kind of praying has a way of focusing your attention on God’s purposes and priorities. It will help you think more like Him, to value what He values, to anticipate what He anticipates. This can be profoundly relevant in terms of current events and modern nations in the Middle East, for instance. God has promised that “all Israel will be saved”; you can participate in that by giving God no rest until he makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

In 2014 the Israeli Education Ministry rolled out Project 929—a government initiative to encourage Jews to read their entire Bible, one chapter/day, 5 days/week. There were study groups, commentary on social media, and thousands of Israelis reading many portions of the Bible (what we would call the OT) they’d never, ever read before—including passages like Isa. 53. The project officially ended this year, in conjunction with Israel’s 70th anniversary. I don’t know if it will be revived and repeated or not, but that’s the kind of thing God can use—even on a national level—to effect what he has promised regarding that nation. That can be additional fuel for this kind of praying.

7. Confessional Prayer

Set aside time specifically to contemplate the holiness and purity of God. Take a conscious, Scriptural inventory of your life by praying through one of the penitential psalms—e.g., Psalms 51 and 130; personalize it phrase by phrase.

8. Psalm Prayer

Select a psalm (of any type) and pray through it phrase by phrase; expand on it, personalize it, adapt it to your own circumstances. These last two, again, are basically forms of not only communion and fellowship but meditation.

9. Hymn Prayer

Select a hymn; don’t sing it, pray through it line by line. You may be surprised to learn what some of these hymns that you have sung for so long are actually saying. (E.g., *I Sing the Mighty Power of God; Praise to the Lord, the Almighty; Holy, Holy, Holy; A Mighty Fortress; Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven; Immortal, Invisible; O God, Our Help; Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*)

10. 3 Hours with God

Plan a full three-hour period to spend alone with the Lord. You can do this indoors or outdoors; but it needs to be someplace where you can be alone, uninhibited, and hopefully uninterrupted in the conscious presence of God for prayer, prayerful Bible reading, and prayerful singing/reading of hymns. Treat it as an appointment, or as a time scheduled and set aside to spend with a spouse.

All these are ways to capitalize on the fact that prayer is, at its most basic level, the conversation and communion and fellowship with God *for which we were first formed*, and *from which we fell*, and *to which God has restored us in Christ*.

Testimonies on Prayer Exercises

At the end of my prayer course, I usually ask students to identify which prayer exercise they found most helpful, and which the hardest or least helpful. I've included a recent sampling of those in your material. The primary value of the course lies in requiring students to pray—in certain, specific ways and for certain periods of time—and then just trying to stay out of the way. The testimonies give a real-life snapshot of how students reacted to many of these prayer experiences.

PRAYING TO OUR FATHER

Remember I started by saying there are two really remarkable things about Matthew 6?

- (1) It's the first time anyone in the Bible ever explicitly teaches us how to pray. And when Jesus taught people to pray, out of all the possible names or titles for God he could have chosen, he instructed us to address God this way: *Our Father*. That actually leads to the second remarkable thing about this text.
- (2) The second remarkable thing about this text is its context: *the overarching theme of this sermon is the Kingdom of God*.

Why is that context so remarkable? Well, what title(s) for deity would you expect Jesus to emphasize in a sermon about the *kingdom*? In the Sermon on the Mount, "King" occurs only 1x, "Lord" occurs 5x, and "God" occurs 6x. The title by which Jesus identifies, preaches, teaches, and applies the truth about God and His *kingdom*, more than any other title, is this one: **Father** (17x). In fact, "Father" is Jesus' characteristic designation for God throughout Matthew (44x). This is a distinctive of Matthew among the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mark, 5x; Luke, 17x). Jesus is not introducing some radically new concept here. You can find a number of OT passages describing God as a Father and even directly addressing God as Father. But this dimension of God's character has never been so accentuated as it is by Jesus, particularly in Matthew.

If you zoom in on this section on prayer, you discover that Jesus keeps sharpening the focus. He starts with *where* (not) to pray (and why) in 6:5-6—*Pray Privately, not Ostentatiously* (6:5-6). The problem is not merely praying in public. The problem is the *desire to be seen* to pray [***they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street-corners that they may be seen by men***]. I.e., the underlying issue is *motivation*, specifically self-promotion. So, yes, Jesus clearly emphasizes **where** one prays, but you could say that's

just a symptom of the deeper issue of **why** one prays: *To be seen by others in prayer? Or to be seen by God in secret? So, don't pray like the hypocrites* (v. 5).

From there Jesus moves to *how* (not) to pray (and why) in 6:7-8—*Pray Thoughtfully, not Mindlessly* (6:7-8). Not “don’t use repetitions” but “don’t use *vain* repetitions.” Repetition can be *vain* because the words themselves are thoughtless phrases used only by force of habit. Repetitions can be *vain* because we don’t really mean them. Or, repetitions can be *vain* because we assume that the more we say, the more likely we will be to get God’s attention and response. The last one is primarily what the Lord has in mind: *for they suppose they will be heard on account of their [polulogia]—their piling up of words*. So (v. 8), *don’t be like them*. Why? *Because **your Father** already knows what you need before you ask*. Now that’s a liberating thought! *We never need to inform God of a situation so that He will know what to do or how to act*. All these ideas—(1) that repetition is required to get God’s attention, (2) that prayer is a way of cajoling God into acting, (3) that longer prayers will merit a favorable answer from God, (4) that prayer needs to fully inform God of something he does not know—all these ideas reflect a *totally wrong—even pagan—view of God*. So, *don’t pray like the heathen* (v. 7).

Finally, and in contrast (note the “therefore” in verse 9), Jesus gives a positive pattern of *what* to pray (6:9-13). Don’t be like the hypocrites: *Don’t pray for men’s eyes; pray for **your Father’s** eyes only*. Don’t be like the heathen: *Don’t pile up words thinking you have to inform or cajole God for an answer; **your Father** already knows. **Therefore, instead**, pray like this (“after this manner..., in this way...,” 6:9-15).*

And what He begins with is not just how we *address* God, but how we *view* God: *Our Father who is in heaven*. It is a title of address that mingles stunning *transcendence* with astonishing *condescension* (*in heaven—He is all-powerful, above all, ruling over all; and yet He is *Our Father*—familiar, tender, caring, compassionate, aware, attentive*).

What does the title “Father” convey that other titles for God do not (“God”; “Lord”; “Master”; “Almighty”; “King”; “Savior”; “Redeemer”; etc.)? Why does Jesus choose this term as *the shaping context* for His teachings all through this sermon, and specifically in this instruction on how we pray? Because, *relationally* this one is foundational. This is the one *Jesus teaches us to use*, to condition how we think of God in prayer. This one is unique in its implications of tenderness, care, provision, protection, closeness, acceptance. Unlike all the others, it is a *family* term. Islam has 99 names and descriptive titles for God; *but Father is not one of them*. Muslims have no Father (cf. Sproul & Saleeb, *The Dark Side of Islam*, 27). But Jesus taught—repeatedly and emphatically—we do.

Illustration

I want to close with an illustration that captures the *reality* of the intimate access we *have* to God. It has become my favorite illustration of prayer.

Charles Hodge was one of the theological giants of Princeton’s early history—brilliant intellect, prolific writer, a favorite among seminary students. (Two bits of trivia: (1) he was

married to a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, and (2) chronic pain in his right leg forced him to walk with a cane for most of his life.)

In his biography of Hodge, Andrew HOFFECKER describes the revered seminary professor's "intense interest and attention to his children." Here's one way he showed it. He had a study built as an addition onto his home. There was an exterior door that opened to the outside, so that seminary students could see him without having to come through the house and disturbing the family. Being an exterior door, it naturally had a lock; so students may or may not have had access to him at any given time for any number of reasons. But the interior door that connected the study to the home was different. There was no lock on that door. In fact, HOFFECKER writes, it was a door with "no latch ... only springs" so that "even the smallest" of his children "always had easy access to their father" (HOFFECKER, *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton*, 85).

It doesn't take lots of words or persuasive pleadings to get God to unlock the door and listen to you; if you're coming from inside the house, if He's your Father, *there's no lock or latch; only springs*. It doesn't take great faith, or great faithfulness, to push your way into His presence; if you're coming from inside the house, all it takes is enough faith and enough desire to push open a spring door, and say, "Father."

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God, and [so] we are (1 John 3:1 ASV).

Let's act like it in our praying.