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The Longing of Every Human Heart

By Barbara Francis

God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence. He is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.

—Richard Foster¹

The chief way we come home to God is through prayer.

He longs for deeper access to our lives. He waits for us to put aside the endless distractions that woo us away from consistent time in his presence. Many of us question the place of prayer in our lives. We muse, “If God is the all-knowing God the Bible tells us he is, why bother praying? He already knows.” Still more live with the haunting memories of unanswered prayers, prayed with all the fervency and belief we could muster, and yet our little brother died anyway, a young husband succumbed to a brain tumor, or the searing pain that never ends—never ended. We all come with questions regarding prayer. In many respects I wish I could be sitting across the table from you, sharing a fire and a cup of coffee. We could verbalize with one another both the lack of interest in prayer

we’ve struggled with over the years and the times it seemed God turned a deaf ear. But it would not be long before the discussion would take a decided turn toward the gazillion ways the Lord has heard our prayers and answered them, the ways he has visited us at the darkest season of our life and held us close when we faced failure. Sadly, we cannot have a personal time together, but I will be asking questions and interacting with you as we go (bulleted and in bold) in hopes that this conversation, such as it is, will be as personal and applicable as if we were face to face.

This is not a discussion defining the terminology of prayer or even the vast theology of prayer, as worthy as those topics are. Here we will look at prayer as the chief way to build a love relationship with God. He made the first move toward us by sending his most precious, sinless son to die in our place. Prayer is the way we tell God we love him by spending time simply enjoying his presence. King David, the author of many of the Psalms, loved spending time in the presence of the Lord. Psalm 27:4 gives us a glimpse into his heart: “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.” This is my prayer for me and for you.

Throughout the Scriptures the message is unmistakably clear, and perhaps it is best summarized in Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears and listens to and heeds My voice

and opens the door, I will come in to him and will eat with him, and he [will eat] with Me” (*Amplified Bible*). From the creation of Adam and Eve to the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reached out to establish a relationship of love with us. It is a sweeping and astonishing invitation to intimacy. When did you first hear him knock? I am sure God had been reaching out to me and knocking on the door to my life for many years, but it wasn’t until I was a freshman in college that I opened that door and gave him entry. What a wonderful beginning! But it was only that, the *beginning* of the relationship. I needed to choose to cooperate with him and consent to follow him every minute of every day by staying filled with the Holy Spirit. This would be the pathway to growth and maturity. But, as we’ve already discussed, even more paramount would be the love relationship God wanted to establish with me, built primarily through prayer. That’s where I got stuck. Praying and being loved were foreign concepts to me.

I came from a very dysfunctional home filled with cursing and abusive behaviors. It was not a Christian home, so there was no praying, just wishing. I wished on the first star I saw at night and made the annual wish when the birthday candles were blown out. But we also had a unique tradition in our home: wishing on hay trucks. We had a cabin in the mountains, so we saw a lot of hay trucks as we drove through the lush fields of central California. Do you know what I wished for my entire childhood? That my daddy would love me. I tried so hard to win his affection. Better grades and polished performances when in public (so as not to embarrass him) were all to no avail.

When I became a follower of Christ and learned for the first time that God loved me—unconditionally and apart from any performance on my end—it simply took my breath away. He is the Father of my great search! The love I longed for from my earthly father was finally found in my heavenly one. It was a free gift and I grabbed it immediately! It is no overstatement to say his love reordered my entire life. At the young age of 19, I began my determined, yet consistently flawed, journey to the heart of God. To be honest, there were years of struggling to believe he loved me, but as time passed, he granted me the grace to believe that what his Word said was true: “For God so loved Barbara that he gave his one and only Son...” (Italics added). And then, just as I began to truly believe he loved me, I’d hit another bump in the road and be

back to questioning his love. And so it went—and goes still. The tug of war will probably be with me until I see him face to face and finally know, without a word spoken, I’ve been loved from the start.

I am not alone in my trouble to believe God loves me. Author Philip Yancy shares his struggles: “For me too, accepting God’s love involves a relentless hushing of voices that whisper otherwise. *You are not worthy. You have failed again. God cannot possibly love you.* My conscience having been formed under sermons portraying an Old Testament god of strict authority and punishment, I can barely grasp the reality that God has condescended to live within me and now loves me from the inside out. I must ask the God who is ‘greater than our hearts’ to halt that ruthless cycle of condemnation and remind me of perhaps the hardest thought to grasp, that God desires and loves me.”²

Prayer is my avenue to intimacy with God. I need to consistently read truth about his love for me from his Word and wrap them around my life in prayer. He hears, comforts, directs, and enters into the various struggles of my life. Max Lucado writes well to this reality: “You can talk to God because God listens. Your voice matters in heaven. He takes you very seriously. When you enter His presence, the attendants turn to you to hear your voice. No need to fear that you will be ignored. Even if you stammer or stumble, even if what you have to say impresses no one, it impresses God—and He listens. Intently. Carefully.”³

- **Spend a moment pondering a few passages where God declares his love for us.**

Psalm 31:21: Praise be to the Lord, for he showed his wonderful love to me...

Zephaniah 3:17: [God speaking] “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

1 John 3:1: How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

- **Thank him for loving you unconditionally.**

Learning how to pray is a thrilling journey that will go on forever. The conversations I have with God while here on earth will continue through all eternity. Prayer deepens my faith, helps me to enter into the lives of people in pain, and brings protracted comfort in times of great loss. During my times of prayer, I unpack my broken childhood and the collateral damage that affects me still today. His Spirit has used the Word of God to unravel the tangled messes of my past and bring hope and needed perspective in places that, frankly, I thought were beyond reach. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice.”⁴ We journey together to an unsullied communion with God.

Prayer has been the linchpin in metabolizing God’s love for me. The invitation to intimacy is extended to every believer. The question is: Will we accept the request? Richard Foster gets it right: “To be effective pray-ers, we need to be effective lovers.... Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love.”⁵ By agreeing to step onto the avenue to intimacy, we’ll be launched straight into the heart of God, where we will learn how to have a consistently fresh encounter with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Prayer is simply talking with God. It does not have to be religious or complicated. We can pray as we walk, kneel, sit, or stand. We can pray out loud or silently. We can pray alone, with our friends, or in a huge auditorium filled with people. Bottom line: We can pray whenever and wherever and however we want. God is most concerned with the attitude of our heart, that it be humble, teachable, and open to him. While these points may be obvious for some, it’s so necessary to clear up little unspoken misconceptions that have the potential to wreak havoc in our intentional pursuit of intimacy.

- **Identify areas in your prayer life you’d like to see change.**

Cultivating Intimacy

For some, this notion of cultivating intimacy with God through prayer is a foreign one. For many of us, prayer is barely a part of our lives or a mere formality at Christmas dinner. It can feel highly structured, business-like, and even ritualistic—certainly not intimate. It’s like flossing our teeth, eating our vegetables, or exercising. You may not *like* it, but it’s

We can pray whenever and wherever and however we want. God is most concerned with the attitude of our heart, that it be humble, teachable, and open to him.

good for you! Such a comparison could not be further from the truth. Prayer enhances and enriches our relationship with God because we’ve invited him into the depths of our soul, freely telling him our struggles. Communication with the Lord goes well beyond rehashing our grocery list of requests. In fact, if our prayer life is limited to just asking, it will never usher us into the intimacy God wants to have with us. Listen to how the dictionary defines *intimacy*: “A close, familiar, usually affectionate or loving personal relationship; a close association or detailed knowledge or deep understanding; the quality of being comfortable, warm, or familiar.”⁶

Many of us yearn for a walk with God characterized in such a way. And that is achieved primarily by a profound prayer life. There are three New Testament words that begin to paint the portrait and answer the question of how intimacy with God can be cultivated through prayer: **come**, **cast**, and **call**.

Come

When we **come** to the Lord, we acknowledge our need for him. We concede that we cannot live on our own and admit that the hunger in our souls is satisfied only by a lush, ever-growing love bond with Jesus. He knew we’d need such a connection, so he invited us into his life:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest. [I will ease and relieve and refresh your souls.] Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am gentle (meek) and humble (lowly) in heart, and you will find rest (relief and ease and refreshment and recreation and blessed quiet) for your souls. For My yoke is wholesome (useful, good—not harsh, hard, sharp, or pressing, but comfortable, gracious, and pleasant), and My burden is light and easy to be borne” (Matthew 11:28-30 Amplified Bible).

Jesus wants us to **come** into his presence no matter our condition: heavy-laden, overburdened, or in need of soul



refreshment. Jesus said these words centuries ago, but the application is very contemporary. In an age of pretending, image management, sin supervision, and self-sufficiency, we hesitate to acknowledge our need to humbly come into his presence, burdens and all. Bill Hybels, in his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, exposes this tendency: “Prayer is an unnatural activity. From birth we have been learning the rules of self-reliance as we strain and struggle to achieve self-sufficiency. Prayer flies in the face of those deep-seated values. It is an assault on human autonomy, an indictment on independent living. To people in the fast lane, determined to make it on their own, prayer is an embarrassing interruption.”⁷

There are hundreds of voices suggesting that our needs are best met through acquiring, achieving, and advancing. And if we believe those voices, there will be little or no room for prayer. What ways have you devised to meet your needs apart from Jesus? This is not a complicated question, but a crucial

one if we hope to accept the invitation to intimacy the Lord extends to all of his children. We must name the props of our lives and confess them as idols that ruin our soul and keep us from an open, honest companionship with the Lord. Then, and only then, will we see the significance of Jesus’ invitation. He said the burdened, the tired, the worn out, the burned out, and the stressed out need to come to *him* because he understands their plight. He will help them through it. The enemy, Satan, would have you run to anything and anyone apart from Jesus Christ to have your life transformed. So the question presents itself: Who is this Jesus we come to? The writer of Hebrews masterfully describes the loving heart of our Savior:

For we do not have a High Priest Who is unable to understand and sympathize and have a shared feeling with our weaknesses and infirmities and liability to the assaults of temptation, but One Who has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet

without sinning. Let us then fearlessly and confidently and boldly draw near to the throne of grace (the throne of God's unmerited favor to us sinners), that we may receive mercy [for our failures] and find grace to help in good time for every need [appropriate help and well-timed help, coming just when we need it] (Hebrews 4:15-16 Amplified Bible).

Note the invitation to intimacy extended to us: “Draw near”—not to get a lecture on all the ways we’ve disappointed God or to be criticized for a shoddy performance. Quite the contrary. He wants us to come and receive help and mercy *in* our time of need, when we are tempted, and even when we have succumbed to the temptation. In the presence of our Jesus, we are safe. We swim in a sea of unconditional love and acceptance that will not be revoked when we screw up. So when we sin, we don’t hide—really a silly thought when we’re dealing with a God who knows all. We come to the One who has fellow feelings with our weakness. We come to confess so we can experience that love that sin blocks.

It took awhile for me to grasp the significance of such an invitation. When I was a little girl, I had “good” clothes for special occasions like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Maybe you did, too. I had good dresses, patent leather shoes, and a nice coat so when I needed to look my best, I could. When I became a Christian, I thought I had to “put on my good clothes” to come to God in prayer. I thought I had to put my best foot forward whenever I talked to him. It never dawned on me that I could come to God just as I was, disheveled and out of sorts. My sense

of intimacy with the Lord skyrocketed when I began talking with him about *everything* that was going on within me. Dressing up the problem, dealing with it on our own, or running to the myriad of alternatives offered in our time simply won’t do. Our intimacy with God is built on a foundation of helplessness and real need. O. Hallesby, who wrote one of the finest books on prayer, addresses this aspect well: “Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas. He hears it from the very moment that you are seized with helplessness, and He becomes actively engaged at once in hearing and answering the prayer of your helplessness.”⁸

- **Acknowledge a place of helplessness.**

Cast

First we **come** to him with all our needs, and then we are invited to **cast** our cares and ourselves onto the lap of our God. 1 Peter 5:7 commands us: “Cast the whole of your care [all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all] on Him; for He cares for you affectionately and cares about you watchfully” (*Amplified Bible*).

I never cease to be amazed by this startling instruction. Did you notice what this verse is asking us to do, and why? *God* wants *us* to bring him everything that concerns us because he loves us. Amazing. And when we obey and do exactly as he asks, intimacy is deepened. But for many of us, this will be a whole new endeavor. We have become very comfortable in our prayer lives not really being honest with God about all the less-than-outstanding stuff

in our lives. Many of us are uneasy praying in incomplete sentences. We like to be able to at least *suggest* a couple of ways the Lord could answer! But sometimes the problems at hand are too messy even to suggest possible solutions.

One day, our daughter, Brooke, came up from her room in haste, asking for a pair of scissors. It was all about knots, the knots in her shoelace that would not come out. A job needed to be done, and scissors would provide the only solution. She was quite convinced there would be no other way to remedy the situation. I said, “Brooke, I’ve been doing knots for a while so let me give it a crack.” She reluctantly handed over the shoe, and I was able to undo the mess. Before long, the shoe was on her foot and she was out the door.

If only knots were reserved for shoelaces! But they aren’t. We all have them in our lives—a bad decision, a horrible mistake, a troubled relationship, or countless knotty, messy things. But untying knots is the Lord’s specialty. We need to cast all of our knots his way because he’s been doing knots for a while. Psalm 55 invites us to heave it all his way. The question is: Will we? “Cast your burden on the Lord [releasing the weight of it] and He will sustain you...” (*Psalm 55:22 Amplified Bible*).

What a perfect picture of the benefits of *real* prayer! What have you been lugging around lately? What person or problem needs to be cast the Lord’s way? What hurt, disappointment, worry, or disillusionment have you not released? We can’t undo the knots and we can’t continue to carry the burdens. We must learn to cast each

of them at the throne of grace where we will find our help in time of need.

- **Spend a moment talking to the Lord.**
- **Release the weight of _____ to him.**

Call

We must **come**, we must **cast**, and finally we must **call** as we continue to consider how the intricacy of intimacy is cultivated through prayer. What a privilege we have to call upon the name of the Lord and know that he hears. He is the God of the open ear: “I love the Lord, because He has heard [and now hears] my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore will I call upon Him as long as I live” (Psalm 116:1-2 *Amplified Bible*).

We must call out to the God who hears! As believers we can talk with God at all times. We don’t need to be in a church or even in a quiet place. And since we know that God hears and answers prayer (John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15), we *must* pray for our friends, our spouses, our children, our pastors, the ministry opportunities that come our way, as well as all the dramas and traumas that swirl around our personal lives.

This brings up a prickly topic I touched on at the beginning of this article: Does God answer prayer? All of us have asked, with the greatest of zeal, that the persistent bad habit would be taken away, or that a loved one would be healed of MS, or that an errant child would return to God. What have you been asking God for that has not been answered?

This is such a tender topic and the cause for many of us to give up on praying altogether. For me, the resolution has come as I focus on God’s love and his timing and on the growth of my character, rather than on answers. As I spend consistent time in his Word—reading it through once a year to see how unswerving his love and actions are—it helps me to learn to wait well. I continue to pray about what is on my heart, huddled in the safe atmosphere of his unchanging commitment to hear and answer my prayers—in his time. As I wait, my faith and character deepen, and my false notions of controlling God are revealed and confessed. The outcome of being in God’s waiting room is a superior love for “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew

6:9-10). He is in heaven, above all the complications in my life. He perfectly superintends my affairs, and I learn to rest in his sovereignty.

Many of my friends struggle with problems that don’t go away. I have made the commitment to stay in their lives for a lifetime, praying for them for a lifetime. And over the years we have seen God use the difficult predicaments to form their character and deepen their dependency on God as they’ve chosen to rest under the hand of the God who loves them. It is not easy or quick, but God is glorified and intimacy is achieved.

When considering **calling** on the Lord, the question arises: How do we pray? This may seem like a juvenile query, but it is not, and I will address it throughout this article. I talk with thousands of people around the world about prayer, and when I bring up this issue, in a group or one-on-one, there is silence. I think we are all a little embarrassed to admit we do not really know how to pray.

We begin with promises from the Word of God as the basis of our prayers for ourselves and others. But many of us don’t know the promises of God because our time in the Scriptures is limited at best. So when the bottom falls out of our lives, we really haven’t a clue where to go in the Word for hope, comfort, and perspective.

A practice I started some time ago is to write down the various Scriptures that speak to my life, relationships, and problems. This beautifully weaves my reading of the Word into the people and concerns I face. As we pray specifically, we will be more aware of how God specifically answers. When we call out to God with our deepest concerns, it cultivates intimacy in our walk with him. Psalm 18 is a flawless picture of King David calling out to God in a time of real trouble. In verse 3 he said, “I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.” And then in verses 16-19 we hear what God did in answer to David’s plea: “He [God] reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; *he rescued me because he delighted in me*” (italics added).

God came to his aid because he delighted in his son, just as he delights in us. When we call to him, we are demonstrating our dependence. Again, this breeds authentic intimacy with God. Remember the definition of *intimacy*? “A close, familiar, usually affectionate or loving personal relationship; a close association or detailed knowledge or deep understanding; the quality of being comfortable, warm, or familiar.” Coming to him, casting our concerns, and calling upon his name accelerate our journey to the throne of God.

- **Pinpoint if you need to ask God to help you to come, call, or cast.**
- **Reconsider the definition of intimacy and choose a phrase you’d most like to be true of your prayer life.**

Disturbing Intimacy

We’ve looked at a couple of ways that our prayer life can grow. But what are some reasons it falls apart? To *disturb* is defined as “to interfere with, to throw into disorder.”⁹

We will take an honest look at what wrecks our prayer life. What causes us to not accept God’s unrivaled invitation to intimacy? There are as many reasons for not praying as there are people reading this article. The fact of the matter is that prayer is hard work. Why? Because it’s so complicated? Because it takes great maturity? Or perhaps because prayer is only for the super-spiritual? No, on each count. Prayer, as we have already observed, flies in the face of a deep-seated belief that we can live life on our own. But when our lives or the lives of our friends fall apart, we see the stark need to turn to God.

- **Identify the main reasons you don’t pray.**

The Obstacle of Sin

We will cover two roadblocks to prayer: sin and spiritual battle. The first way our intimacy can be disturbed is by sin. We all get a little uncomfortable when this three-letter word is mentioned. Coming to grips with sin has led to profound personal spiritual freedom for me. We won’t even open the invitation to intimacy if the crud of sin is corroding our spiritual arteries. Unconfessed sin derails prayer faster than anything. When we know there are actions or attitudes in our lives that are displeasing to God, we don’t want to be in his presence. In fact, we will avoid him at all costs. We’ll quit attending any fellowship gatherings or Bible studies, and

We won’t even open the invitation to intimacy if the crud of sin is corroding our spiritual arteries. Unconfessed sin derails prayer faster than anything.

we’ll even stop hanging out with our Christian friends. It’s all just too unsettling.

One of the beautiful ministries of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin (John 16:8-9). But it is our choice if we are going to obey. I know all too well what it’s like to ignore his gentle nudging.

The internal process for me goes something like this: It all starts with a soft inner word from the Lord, “Barbara, your unforgiving spirit is not pleasing to me, and it’s ruining you. Turn away and confess it to me. I will cleanse you in a moment.” It’s like a tiny popgun going off in my spirit. I rationalize my sin because another’s blatant disregard toward me certainly does not deserve any forgiveness! In fact, they owe me an apology!

Then the Spirit is a little louder—off goes the shotgun. The conviction is stronger and so is my resolve to refuse to obey. My fleshly pride is in full gear.

Next, the Spirit figuratively blasts a 357 Magnum in hopes of getting me to repent. This is hard to admit, but my stubborn reluctance still keeps me from confessing.

Finally, because the Lord’s kindness leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4), the Howitzer blasts, and like King David when confronted with his sin with Bathsheba, I collapse in a sea of regretful tears and heartfelt confession (see Psalms 32 and 51).

But it just didn’t need to take so long. I remember his still, quiet voice gently asking me to be honest about my sin right when it happened. Thinking through the various levels of conviction is instructive in making me aware when I am grieving the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30) so that in the future I will make the right choice. I must be finished with my inclination to blame-shift, make excuses, pretend my attitude or action is not *that* bad, or hide. Richard Foster



and Gayle Beebe speak to the need to understand how sin operates in our lives: “First, we must reflect on our sin, acknowledging its severity and power to disrupt our life with God. Secondly, we must recognize how the sin of Adam and Eve is the pattern for all of us as devious thoughts lead way toward actions. Finally, we must reflect on the sins of others, not to judge or despise them, but to recognize how human sin can ruin God’s destiny for our life.”¹⁰

Here are a few places from the book of Isaiah where we learn how God feels about sin and how he forgives us all:

Isaiah 1:15-17: [God speaking] “When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!”

Isaiah 59:2: But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

Isaiah 43:25: [God speaking] “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”

Isaiah 44:22: [God speaking] “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

- **Is sin choking out your prayer life?**
- **Spend a minute confessing (saying the same thing about sin that God does) and re-reading the Isaiah passages.**

Isaiah is highly qualified to speak personally to this issue of sin and forgiveness. In the sixth chapter of the book in the Bible that bears his name, he had an extraordinary encounter with the thrice-holy God. He was a young man, serving in the court of King Uzziah, but God knew the sweeping plans he had for Isaiah, as well as the internal cleansing that needed to take place before he could be fully used. Quite unexpectedly, Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne. Angels were flying, and he heard them singing grand songs of praise to the King of Kings. And do you know what he did? He confessed his sin of unclean lips. Just being in the presence of the Holy One brought conviction, confession, and cleansing. Just like that. And it is no different with us thousands of years later. He wisely chose not to postpone the inevitable; he confessed the moment he was convicted.

- **What about Isaiah’s story connects with you?**

Spiritual Battle

The second way our intimacy with the Lord can be disturbed is through spiritual battle.

S.D. Gordon concurs as he reflects on this interference from the enemy, which he calls the Great Outside Hindrance: “There remains yet a word to be said about hindrances. It is a most important word; indeed the climactic word. What has been said is simply clearing the way for what is yet to be said. A very strange phase of prayer must be considered here...here lies the fight of fights. One marvels that so little is said of it. For if there is clear understanding here, and then faithful

practicing, there would be mightier defeats and victories: defeats for the foe; victories for our rightful Prince, Jesus.”¹¹

The Bible calls him the evil one, the father of lies, masquerader as an angel of light, the accuser of the brethren, a serpent, and a dragon. If he cannot keep us out of the Kingdom of God, he will try to keep us blind to our new identity, our new power over sin, the joy that awaits every child of the King walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the awesome place prayer has in his defeat and our victory.

Do any of the following things happen to you when you go to prayer? Suddenly, you’re overcome with incredible fatigue as you begin your prayer time; you just cannot keep your eyes open. Or you’re struck with a sudden case of Attention Deficit Disorder and are unable to concentrate on what you’re praying about. You live in a culture addicted to activity, so the pull to “get busy and accomplish something” chews away at your prayer times. When push comes to shove, you simply believe you don’t have time to pray.

Silly as these excuses may appear, they are stumbling blocks to growing in our love relationship with Jesus. Why? Because each distraction keeps us from actually *praying*, and, as we’ve already explored, prayer develops a sweet closeness unlike other spiritual disciplines. Of course it would be a primary place Satan would target.

Putting on the full armor of God, as described in Ephesians 6:10-18, has taught me how to fight the enemy. (I have included a prayer called “Praying On the Armor” in the Appendix.)

The Bible is full of people fighting in prayer. Prayer is what the Lord did when he was under the most intense spiritual battles in the garden, during his trials and beatings, and as he hung on the cross. Stephen prayed as he was being stoned to death. Paul prayed in prison after being stripped and beaten for preaching the gospel. The elderly apostle John, on the Isle of Patmos, was found in prayer when the resurrected Lord Jesus in all his shining glory appeared to him with the final revelation. As you research difficult situations in the Scriptures, you will notice prayer is always a part of the solution. Prayer allows us to tap into heavenly resources, gain biblical perspective, and stay faithful even in the face of trial and tragedy.

Be vigilant in your struggle to make prayer a significant part of your life. Staying alert to sin and the enemy’s schemes will be crucial as we pursue intimacy through prayer.

- **Think through how the enemy has sabotaged your prayer life.**

Establishing Intimacy

We can read about prayer, attend seminars on the topic, and listen to endless sermons about it; but until we actually go to prayer, we will never truly learn to pray. Very practically, how do we *get going* in our prayer life? What do we say and where do we begin? The disciples asked a very similar question after they’d been hanging with the Lord for about a year and a half. In Luke 11:1 they asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” I have adopted that request as my own: “Lord, teach *me* to pray!” The two places in the Word that have been most helpful

to me on my personal prayer journey are the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer.

- **Stop and pray Luke 11:1 for yourself.**

The Psalms form the longest book in the Bible, one hundred fifty chapters devoted to prayer. They were written by a variety of authors for the purpose of praising God. I have identified what I call the "psalmist's pattern." A Psalm often begins with praise, includes specifics on how the writer feels (joy, anger, hate, discouragement, loneliness, hope, dread, etc.), and ends with praise again because the author has brought the character and promises of God to bear on his emotions or circumstances. I've found only one Psalm that doesn't include praise (Psalm 88). The Psalms give us permission to be honest with God as to what is going on in our lives. They teach us how to pray, what words to use, and the importance of including praise every time we talk to the Lord.

Begin with Psalm 1 and pray through one Psalm a day. Here is how it works. Read a verse or two and then turn it into your own personal prayer back to the Lord. For example, Psalm 62:1 says, "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him." Your prayer back to the Lord could be, "Lord, I have a hard time finding my rest in you alone. I want my circumstances to be perfect before I can rest in you. Forgive me, Lord. Thank you for my wonderful salvation! What a mess I'd be without you as my God." Then go on to the next verse. The Lord will teach you how to pray as you use his Word as your prayer book.

The Lord's Prayer teaches us many wonderful lessons as well. It is found in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. This prayer emphasizes the praise of God, our commitment to do the will of God, the provision of God for our daily needs, his forgiveness for our many blunders, and God's protection from the evil one. This is stem-to-stern praying. Jesus said, "This, then, is how you should pray..." (Matthew 6:9). I don't think that means this is the only prayer we can pray, but it does make clear what ingredients need to be included in our prayers. Sylvia Gunter points out the many benefits of praying the Lord's Prayer as a way of life: "As we pray the Lord's Prayer, we will be worshiping more and more each day and experiencing more sense of His presence with us. We will live by a higher agenda when we ask for the Kingdom agenda, not our own. We will more often do the Kingdom thing and submit to His

plan, purposes, and perspectives. We will experience cleanness of soul that only forgiveness brings and see more answers as the hindrances of an unforgiving heart are removed. Through the Lord's prayer, we ask for victory and confidence in Jesus' protective shield against the adversary."¹²

These are a few insights on what to say when we pray, but where do we begin? First of all, set aside a specific time to pray each day. Pick a time where you *hope* to be alone and are most alert. Secondly, choose a place that will become your prayer spot. Third, always have your Bible with you, and open it to a Psalm or another portion of Scripture. Other good resources may include a hymnbook or a book with written prayers—anything that will help you focus your heart and mind on the Lord. Resources I've used over the years include:

Come Away, My Beloved by Frances J. Roberts

Valley of Vision (A Collection of Puritan Prayers) edited by Arthur Bennett

My Utmost for His Highest by Oswald Chambers

Breakfast for the Soul compiled by Judith Couchman

Daily with the King by Glyn Evans

Prayer Portions by Sylvia Gunter

Prayer Essentials, Volumes I & II by Sylvia Gunter

Amazing Grace by Kenneth W. Osbeck

Prayers from the Heart by Richard J. Foster

Jesus Calling by Sarah Young

31 Days of Praise by Ruth Myers

Quiet Talks on Prayer by S.D. Gordon

Along with set times of prayer, there are spontaneous times when we are praying in our heart as we go through our days. This is a "pray continually" kind of praying (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17) that keeps the Lord a part of all we do. It dawned on me some time ago that God has created us to pray 24/7. We talk to ourselves all the time. I have learned



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to make that ongoing conversation one with God instead of just with myself. It was another invitation to intimacy that I accepted, and it has brought me closer to God as a result.

- **Select the Psalms or the Lord’s Prayer as a place to begin deepening your walk with the Lord.**
- **Decide if you’d like to acquire a new companion book to enhance your prayer time.**

In Conclusion

We’ve journeyed along the avenue to intimacy for the express purpose of falling radically in love with our God. We’ve probed into the need to be intentional in cultivating our closeness with God by coming, calling, and casting. We have not ignored the hazards associated with prayer: sin and spiritual battle. And, finally, we’ve drilled down on some of the specifics of actually spending time with the Lord.

Brennan Manning tells a marvelous story of what an intimate prayer life *looks* like:

The story is told of an elderly man who’d accepted the invitation to intimacy years ago. He was quickly approaching the end of his life. A priest went to visit him in the hospital and noticed an empty chair beside his bed. The priest asked if someone had been by to visit. The old man smiled and said with a twinkle in his eye, “I place Jesus on that chair, and I talk to him.”

The priest didn’t understand, so the man explained. “Many years ago a friend told me that prayer was as simple as talking to a good friend. So every day I just pull up a chair, invite Jesus to sit down, and then we have a heart-to-heart talk.”

A few days later, the old man’s daughter paid a visit to that same priest to inform him that her father had died. “Because he was so content,” she explained, “I left him alone in his room for just a few hours. When I went back to his room, he was dead. But what I can’t understand is that his head was not on the pillow, but on an empty chair beside his bed.”¹³

This older man didn’t just imagine Jesus; he *experienced* Jesus. Prayer has the power to lift us from a distant or formal relationship, upward toward intimacy with the God who has

so perfectly loved us. I pray you’ll accept the royal invitation to intimacy. It is the longing of every human heart.

Appendix Praying On the Armor

Spiritual battle is a clear reality in Scripture. Jesus faced off with the enemy before he began his brief ministry. In John 17, he prayed for our protection just before he died. In Ephesians 6:10-18, the apostle Paul gave us a pictorial way to pray and prepare ourselves for the inevitable battle. Here is a suggested way to pray on this armor of God that Paul illustrated:

Oh Lord, how I thank you for the belt of truth that I can buckle around my waist today. I praise you that you are the way, the truth, and the life. May I speak only truth, believe only truth, and think only truth today.

I put the breastplate of righteousness in place. How I praise you that you who knew no sin became sin on my behalf so I could become the righteousness of God in you. I am so thankful that I stand in your presence, not because of my goodness, but because of the perfect and complete sacrifice of our precious Lord Jesus Christ.

And where would I be without the sandals of peace? Because of them, my feet are fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. You are my peace. I have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and I have the privilege to bring this gospel of peace to others who have yet to hear. Give me aid as I go, dear One.

So, today, I gladly take up the wonderful shield of faith with which I can extinguish all the flaming arrows the evil one flings my way. Help me to recognize the darts. I believe that you are the author and finisher of my faith. There may be times you allow some of these arrows to penetrate my armor for your glory and my good. Help me to consider it pure joy when I face trials of many kinds, knowing that you will use these very trials to build an even stronger shield of faith.



Where would I be in battle if I had no helmet? Ever so vulnerable, I must say. But you have not left me without a head covering, and so I take the helmet of salvation. Help me today to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. Light up the lies, half-truths, and intimidations of the enemy.

I also take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Help me to know the Word so well that when the enemy comes with deceitful murmurings, I can counter them with holy words of life. I am eternally grateful that one of the ministries of the Spirit is to bring to mind the words of Jesus.

I put all this armor on by the power of the Spirit, renewing my heart commitment to be praying on all occasions. Remind me to always have an ongoing conversation with you, the victorious God who hears.

I pray this in the sweetest name I know—Jesus.

A Prayer of Preparation by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)

Lord, I so wish to prepare well for this time. I so want to make all of me ready and attentive and available to you.

Please help me to clarify and purify my intentions. I have so many contradictory desires.

I get preoccupied with things that don't really matter or last. I know that if I give you my heart, whatever I do will follow my new heart.

In all that I am today, all that I try to do, all my encounters, reflections, even frustrations and failings, and especially in this time of prayer—in all of this may I place my life in your hands.

Lord, I am yours. Make me what you will. Amen.

Footnotes

- ¹ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Harper, San Francisco, CA, 1992, p. 1.
- ² Philip Yancy, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, pp. 164-165.
- ³ Max Lucado, *The Great House of God*, Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1997, p. 90.
- ⁴ C.S. Lewis, as quoted in *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, Oliver-Nelson Books, A Division of Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 1988, p. xiii.
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- ¹¹ S.D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer*, Destiny Images Publishers, Shippensburg, PA, 2003, p. 77
- ¹² Sylvia Gunter, *Living in His Presence: Prayer Essentials II*, The Father's Business, Birmingham, AL, p. 31.
- ¹³ Told by Brennan Manning at U.S. Staff Conference, Campus Crusade for Christ, 1999.

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