Chapter 4
Prayer: Conversations with God

I believe the most adequate description of prayer is simply talking to God about what we are doing together …
—Dallas Willard

This quote helps me. In fact, it completely transforms the way I see prayer. It deflates the feeling of intimidation and unplugs the legalism that can generate so much heat in me. I think Jesus has a much kinder view of the subject than I do. And I also think I am not alone.

"If you want to pray better, you must pray more," said Mother Teresa.[1] She was right. The only way to get to know God is to talk to him and to listen to him. We learn to pray by praying. Prayer—like meditation and worship—is our route to approaching God, and these three disciplines are as essential to the Christian life as air or water to our bodies.

In my first years of knowing God, I had lots of very dynamic times of prayer. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life so my prayer times were a glorious mix of feeling desperate for God's guidance and finding the gift of his presence. In those formative years the foundation was laid for a strong relationship with God through prayer, worship and soaking up the word of God.

Since then prayer has been both a blessing and a struggle. The good times have been the setting for many precious encounters with God—words, conviction of sin, specific guidance and visitations from the Holy Spirit. I have learned for myself that prayer and worship are inseparable, in many ways synonymous. To worship is to submit to God, which is precisely what happens in prayer. In prayer we tell God how great He is. In our reverence for him, we gladly place ourselves at his service. Whether in words or in song, the heart is the same: prayer is worship and worship is prayer.

> As for the struggle, well, we'll come onto that soon enough. In this chapter I will touch on just a few aspects of the huge subject of prayer, passing along some highlights of my prayer journey and quoting many writers who expertly and eloquently expound on the dynamics of prayer. My emphasis is on relational and listening prayer and overcoming frustrations in becoming a praying person.

Legalism Isn't the Answer

While I've had a regular routine of prayer for many years, there was a time when I was bound up in legalism, never thinking I had prayed enough. Being a first-born son, highly conscientious with a strong work ethic, I became dangerously legalistic about prayer in my early years of following the Lord. On the days that I prayed much, I took pride in the amount of time I prayed. I was filled with a mixture of genuine love for God

mixed with pride in my own works. A by-product of that was a critical attitude towards those I perceived to be less devoted. Like the tax collector in Luke 18, I was foolishly confident of my own righteousness and I looked down on everyone else. My critical spirit was the rotten fruit of pride and legalism.

Another ill effect of a legalistic approach to prayer is that we can never do enough. If we feel that praying is a way of earning God's love, we begin to resent the spending time in prayer, and we even resent God, because we can't live up to the measure that we perceive he is requiring of us. Feeling guilty about not praying enough doesn't accomplish anything.

The prayer time loses life when we're filled with guilt because we couldn't reach our goal *or* we're filled with pride because we *could* reach our goal. If we have a contractual versus a relational approach to prayer, when we've prayed, and "done our part of the bargain" then we may feel that God owes us something. It's duty, not relationship.

> "Devotions"—that word we use to describe a quiet time of prayer and/or study—can easily degenerate into an outward form or method, both a subtle form of legalism. Heartfelt and honest devotion isn't about punching a time clock or logging a certain number of hours per week. We don't have devotions to earn favor from God and we don't owe devotional time to God. But if we're impassioned by a desire to please him in our daily occupation and relationships, we will find a way to pray.

Method is Not the Center of What We Do

Charles Finney said of developing a life of prayer: "The key is devotion, not devotions." His point was that if our first priority in life is to honor God in all we do, we *will* pray.

Says Finney:

> Devotion is the state of heart in which everything—our whole life, being and possessions—are a continual offering to God, that is, they are continually devoted to God. True devotion must be the supreme devotion of the will, extending out to all we have and are—to all times, places, employments, thoughts and feelings … Now remember, nothing short of this standard is devotion in you! Bear it in mind that no particular acts of zeal, or gushings of emotion, or resolutions to change, or promises of future obedience—constitutes devotion.

My highest goal is to please God with my life. To do that, I have to learn what is on his heart. So I talk to God. If you're dependent on him, you talk to him. There's no way forward in a truly devoted life without asking God for help, wisdom, and forgiveness.

Dallas Willard describes this dynamic very well:

> I believe the most adequate description of prayer is simply talking to God about what we are doing together … Prayer is a matter of explicitly sharing with God my concerns about what he too is concerned about in my life. And of course he is concerned about my concerns, and in particular, that my concerns should coincide with his. This is our walk together. Out of it I pray.[2]

Tackling big challenges in daily life gives me a lot to pray about. As a freelance minister, a lot of my work—worship recordings, books and itinerant work—comes directly from my own initiative. That involves a lot of planning and decision-making that requires prayer and listening to God. As a husband and father of eight children, I have a lot of responsibility. This drives me to prayer, offered in short interludes throughout my day.

Here is an excerpt from the introduction in David Winter's book, *Closer Than a Brother,* to Brother Lawrence's book, *The Practice of the Presence of God* regarding a relational verses transactional approach to prayer:

> Stop putting your trust in human rules, devotional exercises, and acts of penance. Instead, exercise a living, obedient faith in God. Live as though he were beside you and with you all the time—as indeed he is. Seek to do what he wants, as and when he commands it, and make his command your joy and chief pleasure. The person who lives like that will be fully human, completely Christian, and genuinely happy.[3]

As I've read about the prayer lives of many different Christian leaders, I'm so encouraged to find out that many of them, like me, feel like a beginner at prayer even after many years of knowing God. The widely respected Catholic writer, Thomas Merton said, "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life!"[4]

The English preacher Leslie Weatherhead said:

> I have always found prayer difficult. So often it seems like a fruitless game of hide and seek in which we seek and God hides. I know God is very patient with me. Without that patience I should be lost. But frankly I have to be patient with him. With no other friend would I go on seeking with such scant, conscious response.[5]

Knowing that even the greatest preachers struggled in prayer helps me take a more grace-filled attitude to the challenge of prayer. A high percentage of Christians struggle to pray effectively. Zondervan, the Christian book publisher, did a survey requesting input on peoples' prayer lives—only 23 out of 678 people responded that they had a satisfactory prayer life.[6]

What do we do with this? If we beat ourselves up for our immaturity in prayer it won't get us anywhere. Dallas Willard encourages us not to attempt heroics in our prayer life:

> It is much harder to learn if we succumb to the temptation to engage in "heroic" efforts in prayer. This is important. Heroism, generally, is totally out of place in the spiritual life, until we grow to the point at which it would never be thought of as heroism anyway.[7]

I figured out a long time ago that I stand no chance of ever impressing God with acts of piety. He loves me, period. That sets me free to pray, even if my prayers are very simple and brief. Richard Foster gives a wonderful illustration of God's delight in our simple prayers. It's like a mother delighting in the crude drawing of her four-year old girl. The drawing is so crude that you can't even figure out what it is. From an artistic perspective, the drawing may be ugly, but the adoring mother tells her daughter, "That's beautiful, darling!"

How encouraging that our Lord is *full* of grace towards his children who, like babies distracted by shiny baubles, we lose focus on our Father even when we're sitting in his lap. He loves us and listens to us even in our weakness:

> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses … Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:15-16).

Persevering When God Seems Distant and Prayers Aren't Answered

There cannot be many situations more difficult than when you feel like God is neither listening to you nor anywhere near you. In times like this prayer can feel like a chore, like going through the motions. Frederick Buechner describes this feeling: "I was less like a man praying than a man *being* a man praying."[8] His prayers felt mechanical rather than organic. We must constantly remind ourselves that God doesn't see prayer as a performance, that it doesn't matter what we feel. God highly values our prayers in spite of the emotions we attach to them.

We all know that the sense of feeling distant from God is built into this earthly life. We catch glimpses of heavenly glory and then the clouds hide the sunshine from our view. God mysteriously grants and withholds his presence. Some people frequently experience God through their senses, and others rarely if ever have any sensations in prayer. Simon Guillebaud picks up on this and points us back to C.S Lewis:

> C.S. Lewis talked of how sometimes people experience extraordinary times of intimacy and closeness to God. However, God "never allows this state of affairs to last long. Sooner or later he withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties that have lost all relish. It is during such

> trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature he wants it to be."[9]

Uncomfortable as it may be, the truth is that God may let us suffer the withdrawal of his presence as a way of leading us to maturity. It's one way he helps us become the people he wants us to be.

It is precisely because of this that the New Testament presents prayer as a long, arduous battle. Jesus tells a story of a widow nagging a judge, and another of a man pounding on his neighbor's door for bread after he and his family have gone to bed. Any parent who prays for their children for decades for protection, wisdom and guidance understands this idea. As you watch your children grow up, you know that you can't control them. You want them to have a heart that seeks God, but only God can do that, so you fight for them in prayer. In praying for our kids when they seem to be floundering in their faith, my wife, Linda, says, "It's in the hard times that I learn about faith—the faith of Abraham, who believes that he is the father of many nations even when he is without any children, and just about dead."

Paul urges us to be Christian soldiers who wear the full armor of God, praying in the Spirit on all occasions. He urges Timothy to endure hardship like a soldier, to toil like a farmer, to compete like an athlete. Jesus says, "Pray and don't give up." He treasures our long-term loyalty and expects us to keep going through the seasons of silence and dullness.

Surrendering Control

Ours is a world of instant everything. We're accustomed to getting what we want and getting it right now. Our culture doesn't teach us the value of deferred gratification and as a result we feel entitled to fast service and are ready to complain if we don't get it. We are fast losing our sense of perspective, like the man I heard about who was promised in-flight wireless Internet access by the airline he was flying. This was the first time wireless Internet would be available on any airline in the world. When the Internet connection didn't work right away, the man was disgusted and complained bitterly. We act like spoiled children when our enjoyment of modern day conveniences is interrupted. I see the ugliness of my own impatience when I'm on the phone with a customer service representative who can't solve a simple problem on my visa bill.

This is where prayer comes in. We give up our control of the conversation; we learn patience. In prayer, we find the place of humility. We wait before God; we let him be God. We can't manipulate God. We are fragile, and He is strong. We are incompetent to change things, and he is sovereign. He is holy, and we are flesh. It shouldn't be surprising that we feel so small in prayer. Feeling "small" is akin to a quality Jesus applauds in the Sermon on the Mount—meekness. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5). "Inheriting the earth" sounds pretty good to me.

God likes to hang out with the lowly. He says in Isaiah: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15). Prayer is all about us becoming more Christ-like as we say no to our fleshly impulse to dominate our world. Simon Tugwell says that in praying we "stop playing God": "God is inviting us to take a break, to play truant. We can stop doing all those important things we have to do in our capacity as God, and leave it to him to be God."[10]

Honesty in Prayer

An entry from my prayer journal reads: "Jesus, help me not retaliate against the circumstances of life. Forgive me for making threats when my kids mess up. Help me die to sin and live for righteousness. Forgive me for sinful words."

God knows everything about us. In prayer we are only ever telling him what he already knows. So for prayer to be authentic, it must be honest. C.S. Lewis said: "We must lay before him what is in us, not what *ought* to be in us."[11] Here is one of those mind-boggling truths about the real Jesus—I can talk to him about *anything* that's happening in my life and he loves me just the same. It helps me to tell him how inadequate I feel for the tasks ahead of me, to unload my fear of the future, and my struggle with lust. None of these things surprise him. I experience his acceptance as I speak honestly with him.

When Jesus says to the Samaritan woman that the Father is looking for "true worshippers," the word 'true' means "real and genuine" in contrast with the symbolic and typical.[12] This woman got the shock of her life when Jesus told her "You're right! You don't have a husband—for you have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now … " (John 4:17,18, NLT). In spite of what he knew about her, he offered her living water. Jesus was inviting her into a relationship with God unlike anything she had heard of. No longer would worship be about the exterior features like the location of the worship service.

This woman couldn't fake anything in Jesus' presence and get away with it. Nor can we. We can't fool God. He is the wonder of wonders who knows the "real me" and yet still accepts me. That inspires floods of gratitude everyday, and it gives us courage to be honest with God, knowing that no sin will disqualify us from being his beloved children.

Lewis writes: "The prayer preceding all prayers is: May it be the real 'I' who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to."[13] The real "me" is a very ordinary person. (I always find if funny that people around the world think I'm some kind of "holy man" because I've written a few good worship songs. They don't know the real me.)

God loves ordinary words spoken by average people. We need not put on airs or change the tone of our voice, or even speak in complete sentences when praying to God. He understands even our groans. When my wife is sick, "Lord, please heal Linda" is sometimes all I pray. Jesus was the champion of short prayers, raising Lazarus from the dead with just three words.

To worship him rightly, we must see him accurately. To offer prayers "in spirit and truth," we must lay our hearts bare before God. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "We cannot make him visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to him."[14]

Worship that God accepts is worship offered on his terms: He requires honesty and authenticity. Coming to prayer pushes us towards self-examination. David prays, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts " (Ps 139:23). Worship isn't a place to hide from God; it's a place to be found by God. True worship will pull us out of hiding. Intimacy involves revealing the deepest part of your being to another, even when it's not pretty.

Confession of sin is liberating. The thing that binds you is the thing that frees you if you'll only acknowledge it. The moment you come to him broken and honest, he frees you.

Thy Will be Done

Prayer is more about God getting his way than us getting ours. As I sit and ponder what I want to ask of God, I wonder how pure my motives are. I wonder how closely my desires line up with God's desires, and often I don't know. So, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" is one of my most frequent prayers.

Philip Yancey is honest about being re-directed by God in his prayers:

> I have discovered that God wisely answers prayer in a different way than I envision. I pray that my book will win a prize and instead find I need to improve my writing. I pray to get rich and instead find that money would be a curse distracting me from more important things. After enough of these lessons, I adjust my immature prayers in the light of what I have learned from knowing God through meditation.[15]

"Be slow to pray," says Eugene Peterson.

> Praying puts us at risk of getting involved with God's conditions … Praying most often doesn't get us what we want but what God wants, something quite at variance with what we conceive to be our best interests. And when we realize what is going on, it is often too late to turn back.[16]

In the famous story of Daniel and the Lion's den, Daniel knew that God was able to deliver him from death, even in a pit of hungry lions. But he also said to the king, "But even if he does not [deliver us], we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your

gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:18). Daniel didn't presume to know God's will. His choice to worship wasn't conditional on the type of answer God would send.

I live in a nice house. The house payments aren't onerous, but sometimes I wonder if God will continue to provide enough income for us to live here. If God wants to, he can give us enough to live here. If not, we will accept that as his choice and his way of guiding us to sell the house and find something simpler. And we would still be very blessed. In any case the best I can pray is this: "Thy will be done, Lord!"

Listening Prayer

In his book on prayer, Philip Yancey says, "Sometimes I wonder if the words I use are the least important part of prayer." He describes prayer as "a time to keep company with God."[17] In most of my prayer times I do a lot of listening. I'm listening for any insights that God might whisper to me. I'm thinking about a passage of scripture and how that changes the way I approach the day or the year ahead of me. In prayer and meditation times I let the teachings of an inspirational leader from church history soak in.

Prayer is like a conversation between two people in which each person's words are influenced by the others' comments; the direction and topic of conversation are influenced by both God and me. Eugene Peterson compares the partnership of praying with the Holy Spirit's help to a Greek verb tense in which the speaker contributes but doesn't control: "Prayer takes place in the middle voice. The middle voice is that use of the verb which describes the subjects as participating in the results of the action." The people talking influence but don't control the outcome. Says Peterson: "We neither manipulate God, nor are manipulated by God. We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it."[18] We are united with Jesus through his indwelling Spirit; out of that mutuality of spirit, we listen and act, whether it is through prayer, speech or service.

Brother Lawrence makes a similar point when he suggests that we:

> … take the position in prayer before God of a dumb helpless beggar at a rich man's gate. It is the beggar's responsibility to be alert to the rich man's moves. In the same way, make your times of prayer times of submission. Fix your thoughts on him whether you speak or keep quiet. Watch for his every move.

Prayer is about listening attentively, and only then responding.

As we "watch for his every move," the name of a friend who is sick with cancer and in need of prayer may come to mind. You may suddenly remember a co-worker you haven't seen in a long time—it's God's way of nudging you to pray for her. Ole Hallesby says, "Prayer has one function and that is to answer 'yes' when Christ knocks."[19]

Prayer is a way of developing our friendship with God. It's not just to accomplish things. Joyce Hugget shares her epiphany of realizing the value of listening prayer:

> … it had never occurred to me that God wanted me to linger in his presence so that he could show me that he delighted in me. Until now, my prayer had been vocal, busy, sometimes manipulative, always achievement-oriented. To kneel at the foot of a cross and allow music to wash over me so that I could "just be" with God in stillness which convinced me that "he is," that "He is God" was a new experience. But to "waste time" for God in this way changed my life, changed my view of God, changed my perception of prayer, changed my understanding of listening to God.[20]

One way I "put up my spiritual antennae" is to pray in tongues. Evidently, Paul prayed frequently in tongues, but privately rather than in church: "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor 14:18-19).

Paul describes praying in tongues as an activity of his spirit, but not his mind: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind … " (1 Cor 14:14-15).

I don't fully understand what's happening when I pray in tongues, but somehow my spirit is engaging with God's Spirit. I don't know what to pray but God does. Praying in tongues is a pathway for asking according to his will.

Finding a Routine

My regular habit is to rise at around 6:30 am. I have a cup of coffee and read scripture and various books inspired by scripture. Reading God's word and gifted authors expounding on scripture spurs me on towards prayer. A mixture of reading, listening and praying works best for me. Sometimes I include musical worship, playing and singing a few favorite songs or singing spontaneously.

Now that Linda and I are finished with the babies-and-toddlers stage of our lives, it's easy to keep a regular discipline. Just a few years ago it was more challenging to carve out times to pray. In describing those early years, Linda says, "Quiet times were a bonus. I needed to know that there was help, wisdom, strength and anointing 24/7." She has also said to me, "I didn't have very many quite times. Lots of *crisis* times and *chaos* times, but few quiet times." Now that our youngest child is eight years old, Linda *does* have a regular quiet time but she says, "When I have quiet times and time to contemplate I often doze in and out of prayer. Praying and listening while I work and while I play is usually more effective."

In preparing to write this chapter, I ran across some notes I made some years ago describing the flexibility required for parents of young children:

"My daily discipline is sometimes interrupted by a two-year old who gets up earlier than usual. (While preparing this talk, my two-year old bit my five-year old's finger and I went to break up a fight.)"

I have many friends who leave for work very early in the morning, so early morning prayer and study doesn't work for them. Each one of us has to find a pattern that works best. I know that without a regular prayer and study time I would lose my bearings, lose my reference point. There's nothing like being in God's presence, nothing quite like having a living, vital experience of the love and character of God. This is essential to be able to keep walking the path of faith. Faith for day-to-day living is like water in a leaky bucket; we have to keep going to Jesus to fill up the bucket.

Paul prayed for the Ephesian church members: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith … " (Eph 3:16-17). Wasn't Christ already dwelling in their hearts? Yes. Did they need more? Of course they did. We always need more of God.

In the Internet age you can spend the whole day "surfing." There's enough funny stuff on YouTube to entertain you all day long. You can make Facebook the center of your life. It's easier than ever to let prayer be squeezed out. If we don't have focused time with God, we lose our edge. Not to pray is to say that we don't need God, that we can handle things by ourselves. "If we grasp the importance of prayer," writes Simon Guillebaud, "it will undergird our very existence and act as the engine-room for all our activities, such that we will be too busy not to pray."[21]

It seems like I spend a lot my life "coming back to the heart of worship" as Matt Redman puts it. I need to re-center my life on Jesus everyday. I'm just like everyone else—I feel pulled away from the pursuit of God by the counterfeit gods of this world. So I go directly to the well of living water. I go to God's word to find what is real, what is lasting. There I find my Father. There I find his instructions for living my life.

It is only when I slow down long enough to absorb God's love and truth that I find food for my soul and nourishment for the journey. "All our ancestors agree that without silence and stillness there is no spirituality, no God-attentive, God-responsive life."[22] There's nothing like being with God, meditating on his marvelous attributes, thanking him for all he has done for me. Sometimes I find great refreshing in singing simple songs of love and devotion—just God, me and the guitar or piano. The simple joy of melody lifts my soul and enlightens my mind to the presence of Jesus. I see that Jesus is alive.

On summer mornings in Vancouver, after a long, cold, rainy winter and spring, I often pray and read in the early morning on my front porch. I turn my face towards the sun, basking in the warmth it brings in the cool morning air. I hear a chorus of birds singing their various God-given songs. I see the majestic mountains in the distance, and I thank the One who made them. I marvel at God's faithfulness throughout my life, his tender care despite my smallness in his great creation.

Conclusion

A prayer from my journal, 2002: "A lifelong quest to be God's friend—God, help me to be your friend: to be with you, to please you, to love you. May I give you my best. May my eye be single, focused on you."

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