

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

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Library Bible Study

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Prayer and Me

- Learning to listen more
- Learning to be part of the solution

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CHAPTER 20

PRAYER AND ME

Prayer, in short, is the field hospital
in which the diseased spirituality
that we have contracted from the Powers
can most directly
be diagnosed and treated.

WALTER WINK

On safari in South Africa I soon learned to respect the instincts of our African scout, Lawrence. He sat in a jump seat that folded down by the front grille of the Land Rover, from which perch he looked for scat, tree rubbings, hoof prints, and other clues that a large animal had recently passed by. Whenever he spotted something he raised his hand for the driver to stop. Then he would sniff the air and point in a certain direction. "Rhino—that way. Very close." Or, "Two giraffes passed by here maybe one hour ago." Lawrence never missed.

Once, however, the white driver seemed irritated when Lawrence raised his hand without showing any sign of having detected an animal. "Back up," Lawrence ordered, and the driver reluctantly obeyed. Lawrence then pointed to a modest bush abloom with yellow flowers. "That is the weeping wattle bush," he said in a reverential tone. "It is very important to my people."

He went on to tell of the days when white South Africans imported black workers from neighboring countries to work in the gold mines. It was hot, dangerous work. The miners descended in cages down shafts as deep as two miles below the surface where, in near darkness at temperatures found only in the fiercest deserts, they would swing picks at rocks too hot to touch with their bare hands. They lived in dormitories surrounded by barbed wire. Most of them came from illiterate families and so never got mail from home. They had no calendars or watches. The miners' days passed in a monotony of grueling labor underground, dinner in a mess hall, and a card game or other diversion before turning in to rest for another day just like the previous one.

"They saw their families only two weeks a year," Lawrence said. "At Christmastime. And the weeping wattle blooms in early December. When the men saw these yellow blossoms, oh, how their hearts lifted. They knew that soon they would see their wives and children."

Lawrence's story had particular poignancy because we knew that his contract with the game preserve permitted him to visit his own family only twice a year. The weeping wattle bush was for him, too, a marker of hope. In less than a month he would be reunited with his wife and see an infant son for the first time.

Tuning In

By nature I resist techniques, especially those relating to spiritual disciplines. I would prefer to keep my relationship with God impromptu. The problem is, every time I proceed down such an idealistic path God gets pushed to the side. I need markers, like the weeping wattle bush, to remind me of another world out there, a hidden reality on which my life should center. And, like the African guide Lawrence, I need to take note of ordinary clues that might easily go overlooked. If prayer is my response to God's presence, first I must tune in to that presence.

Henri Nouwen suggests that we "create space in which God can act." God, who made space in the most literal sense, the universe, needs us to protect a God-space, to prevent our lives from filling up with other things. For control freaks like me, that means sheltering space in which something unexpected and unplanned may happen. Although I cannot control the sense of God's presence—on an emotional level, it will come and go—I can actively wait for it and attend to it.

While he was working among the poor in Bolivia, Nouwen took an evening off during Advent season to see a movie. "The movie was so filled with images of greed and lust, manipulation and exploitation, fearful and painful sensations, that it filled all the empty spaces that could have been blessed by the spirit of Advent." *How often do I let that happen?* I asked myself when I read that passage. I enter a motel room and switch on the television. I have CNN going when I eat lunch and the radio playing when I drive the car. I'm always reading a newspaper, magazine, computer manual, Internet blog, *something*. I fill up spaces.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear," Jesus said. Any parent knows about ears that hear not. "But I didn't hear you," a child protests, after clear

instructions not to wander beyond the driveway. A revealing comparison, it occurs to me, for we often fail to "hear" God's clear commands.*

Listening is an art, and I must learn to listen to God just as I have had to learn to listen as a journalist. When I interview people, I ask a question and they give an answer. Early on, especially when the interview subjects were nervous and halting, I would jump in and finish their sentences. I learned, though, that if I don't interrupt or move quickly to a follow-up question, if I sit in silence for a while, they may speak again, filling in details. Counselors know this too.

God often speaks quietly. Memories, phrases from the Bible, images of friends in need drift into my mind unsummoned. Hope stirs to life where previously I felt despair. A spirit of forgiveness rather than revenge settles in after a wrong. I feel a call to engagement and not passivity. These things tend to happen, though, only when I'm tuned in to God.

A seminary professor wrote a book titled *Wasting Time with God* that deals with the notion of simply being with God. It speaks volumes about modern life that the publisher chose that clever title, for during much of history whole armies of monks and nuns did nothing but "waste time" with God. It was their vocation. I have learned, and I'm sure the book's author would agree, that time with God is not wasted, even when it seems so. Do I waste time by visiting a nursing home? By sitting in an ICU ward with a dying friend? By staying up all night with a sick child? Being present with someone I love is never a waste of time, especially if God is the one with whom I am present.

Martha complained about Mary wasting time at Jesus' feet while work piled up. Judas groused about the same Mary wasting expensive perfume by pouring it on Jesus. Indeed, any time spent in prayer seems wasted to someone who has other priorities than a relationship with God. For one who loves God, however, there is no more productive, or necessary, act.

Prayer as Therapy

All too often I crowd out prayer because in other activities I see tangible results. With prayer much of the benefit takes place behind the scenes, beneath the level of conscious awareness, in ways difficult to measure.

*Pamela Grey once commented, "For one soul that exclaims 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth' there are ten that say 'Hear, Lord! For thy servant speaketh.'"

The very process of “wasting time” with God changes me on the inside. A child does not decide, “I think I will imitate Dad,” and then go about practicing posture, mannerisms, and voice inflections that bear an uncanny resemblance to his dad. He absorbs family traits unconsciously, by sustained contact.

Dr. Alexis Carrel, a French physician awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine, published a book in 1936 extolling the therapeutic value of prayer. Pray regularly, he advised, and you will find your life improved. The bodily posture itself—relaxing, joining hands, bending knees—has health benefits. Prayer helps us resolve emotional conflicts, purge guilt, and overcome negativism. And by verbalizing what goes on inside, the pray-er practices a kind of self-induced therapy.

Carrel assured his readers that these benefits accrue whether or not prayer is addressed to God or indeed any god, and regardless of its content. Dr. Carrel’s theories, since adopted by many New Age advocates, may well be correct, but they miss the main point of Christian prayer. Whom we pray to matters more than how or what we pray. As E. Stanley Jones observed, “If prayer were only autosuggestion, I would still pray. It’s a better hypothesis with better results. But I would find it difficult to pray for long, for we cannot

give ourselves to an unreality. I do not want to live in a paradise if it turns out to be a fool’s paradise.”

Any therapeutic value to Christian prayer comes as an outgrowth, not a goal. As Jesus promised, the fruit will grow if we remain attached to the vine. Our job is to remain attached, to “abide.”

I recall a time early in our marriage when Janet and I were at loggerheads about, well, almost everything. We were still sorting out power issues, and neither of us was giving much ground. Every decision, major or minor, escalated into a tug-of-war. Stymied, we agreed to try something that had never before worked for us: we would pray together. Each day we sat on a couch and spilled out our inner selves to God. We prayed about those decisions, about the people we would contact that day, about our friends and family members. Our own power issues took on an entirely new light as we subjected ourselves to a Higher Power. We were now side by side before God, not facing each other in opposition. Twenty-five years later we keep up the practice.

Has that practice been therapeutic? Yes, certainly. Even more important, though, it gives us as a couple a daily reminder of a reality we might otherwise ignore. We made our vows before God, after all, and it seems only

One Rare Moment

BEN

I have had at least one supernatural experience while praying, and I look back on it as a holy moment. I was visiting a friend, a hemophiliac, who had contracted AIDS from contaminated blood. Everyone knew he was dying, and I went to his hospital room with my associate pastor to serve him Communion.

My friend was gaunt, his skin pale and bruised, and thrush had broken out in his mouth. He swallowed the Communion elements with some difficulty. I expected him to be anxious over death, but he wasn’t. He told us a very moving story. Earlier in the week an angel had visited him in the hospital room. “Don’t be afraid,” said the angel. “You’ll be seeing your daughter soon” (a daughter who had died in infancy).

As I sat by his bed, I could hear the television in the next room. The setting, with its industrial furniture and humming machinery, was anything

but mystical. After he finished his story, I felt a need to prolong the moment. “We need to be silent,” I said. And in that setting, for the first and only time, I spoke in tongues. I had been around charismatics and even prayed for the gift of tongues but had never received it. Now it happened to me, as a spontaneous response to the *gravitas* of that moment, the glory we had glimpsed as he told us of God’s mercy to him on his deathbed.

I now serve as a chaplain to university students. And I must say that around them I hesitate to mention that experience, though for me it was profound. We get such moments rarely. I hear students speak of God so casually: “God told me to start a Bible study. . . . God told me to date this girl.” To someone who doesn’t know the lingo, it sounds like the Christian life is one big mystical experience after another.

I wouldn’t trade my experience with my friend in the hospital for anything—but that was one moment out of a lifetime of showing up, of waiting on God. I had been in ministry for years before I experienced anything like that. I tell the students that 90 percent of praying is showing up.

appropriate to welcome God as an interested party into the ordinary, and sometimes stormy, workings of our marriage.

"Nobody has to prove to me that prayer makes a difference," wrote Henri Nouwen during his stay in South America. "Without prayer I become irritable, tired, heavy of heart, and I lose the Spirit who directs my attention to the needs of others instead of my own. Without prayer, my attention moves to my own preoccupation. I become cranky and spiteful and often I experience resentment and a desire for revenge." Nouwen admitted that his hour a day in a chapel was full of distractions, restlessness, sleepiness, confusion, and boredom. But he noticed in retrospect that the days and weeks were different, positively different, when he prayed: "Without this one-hour-a-day for God, my life loses its coherency and I start experiencing my days as a series of random incidents and accidents."

A few years ago I wrote a book on the Old Testament, *The Bible Jesus Read*, in which I discussed the cursing psalms that called for revenge on enemies. I described a practice of taking a weekly "anger walk" on the hill behind my home, during which I would present to God the resentment I felt toward people who had wronged me. Forcing myself to open up deep feelings to God had a therapeutic effect. "Usually I come away feeling as if I have just released a huge burden," I wrote in that book. "The unfairness no longer sticks like a thorn inside me, as it once did; I have expressed it aloud to someone—to God. Sometimes I find that in the process of expression, I grow in compassion. God's Spirit speaks to me of my own selfishness, my judgmental spirit, my own flaws that others have treated with grace and forgiveness, my pitifully limited viewpoint."

I came across that passage just today and had the startling feeling that someone else had written it. You see, it has been several years since I have taken an anger walk. I still stroll on that hill, usually on Sunday afternoons. I check the fox den, look for signs of beetle damage on the Ponderosa pines, follow animal tracks in the snow. And I still pray, though now it would be more accurate to call them "praise walks." In time, the anger melted away. Healing took place, even without my conscious awareness.

Fear

Ultimately prayer proves its power by producing changes in us the pray-ers. "Prayer is taking time to let God recreate us, play with us, touch us as an artist who is making a sculpture, a painting, or a piece of music with our lives,"

writes Don Postema. Looking back, I can see several specific ways in which the power of prayer has helped re-create me. Fear is one example.

I take a refresher course in fear every summer as I try to climb some of the more difficult mountains in Colorado. Since I get queasy when I clean the gutters on my house, edging my way across a narrow ledge with a thousand-foot drop on either side requires some major self-therapy. On a mountain fear can be your enemy, by paralyzing you and tempting you to make rash decisions, or your friend, by teaching you responsible limits. Last summer after a five-hour climb I turned back a mere sixty feet from the summit of Wetterhorn Peak. Each step of the final ascent was coated with hard-packed snow, and a single misstep would have sent me hurtling to certain death. Made wise by fear, I postponed the ascent to a warmer day.

Sometimes the fear is only *apparent*: a granite face that looks perilous turns out to have good ledges and handholds. Sometimes the fear is fully appropriate, and then trust is the only sure antidote. Whenever possible I climb with partners because it helps to vocalize fear and get counsel from others. Which route seems safest? Is this move foolhardy? Can we make the summit before that thunderstorm rolls in? I practice with an ice axe during the winter so that I can trust my self-arrest instincts in case of a slide down a snowfield. I trust ropes when they prove necessary.

On two of the hardest peaks my wife and I hired a professional guide, which did wonders for fear. As it happened, the guide who led us had summited Mount Everest three times and Mount Denali thirteen times. I transferred all my insecurities to crusty old Bob, who knew these two Colorado peaks as well as I know my backyard. Thanks to him, I experienced less fear crossing the notorious Knife Edge on Capitol Peak than climbing a less difficult peak on my own.

Prayer introduces a very different set of fears than what I confront on a mountain, and yet there are some parallels. For years I labored under a huge *apparent* fear: the image of a stern, judgmental God as a sort of cosmic Enforcer. Who would want to pray to that God? With such a *fearsome* partner, how could I pursue an intimate relationship? My defenses *lowered* over time as I experienced grace, as I met trustworthy guides, and then supremely as I got to know Jesus.

For a recovering fundamentalist, it takes courage to trust that the gospel truly is good news from a God who is love. I sought out guides who believed this most fundamental and yet seldom-realized fact of faith. For ten years I followed around Dr. Paul Brand, who brought healing and grace to some