

Four Prayer Challenges



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Prayer - that vast subject that is so much written about, preached about, and talked about, but so little of it actually done!

So I wanted to share some thoughts on four points to prayer that I have found very helpful, maybe not ones that are generally preached on or written about. The first thing I would like to say that as Christians we often get confused about just what is "prayer", and part of this is due to our taking on board so many ideas and opinions then welding them all together and eventually finding we get tired with prayer. It seems hard, inconvenient, and even boring at times.

Let's try to get some refreshment into our understanding of prayer. What you might find helpful is that there's a distinction between prayer, and what we call intercession. **Prayer is general. Intercession is specific.** If we can appreciate the difference it will help enormously, especially in a group prayer time when we gather to "intercede" and end up having to say "Amen" to a VERY wide range of prayer topics.

If you want to "pray" for all sorts of issues (someone's health, a marriage, something going on in your church, etc) that's fine - but just realize that it's a bit like a shotgun approach. A lot of ammunition scattered very broadly that may not hit the target.

Intercession however is quite specific and targeted. It is focussed, and keeps the focus going. Intercessory corporate prayer may possibly just have ONE subject for the prayer team (revival perhaps or someone's salvation), and those praying stay on the subject and press through. It takes discipline both personally and corporately to achieve this, but there are very often distinct answers to this kind of prayer - often more so than a general "prayer time" when the answers are frankly quite thin on the ground.

It's not that the Father answers one kind of prayer over the other, but there's a point to staying on target and not wandering from this subject to that subject and back again. Really, both our prayer times and intercessions should be birthed from heaven's throne not from what the team leader/pastor etc thinks is a good subject to pray about this week.

So here are four challenges to prayer that you might find helpful. If they don't scratch where you're itching, that's fine. I'm simply putting these forward as suggestions to help us get a little more encouraged in our prayer life.

1. Measured Prayer. This kind of prayer is when you take time and pay attention to what you're praying. So often Spirit-filled believers just jump in to prayer without first asking "what has heaven got to say?". Ever heard someone pray a rapid excitable prayer and get things mixed up? Like when someone says "Father we just thank you that you died on the cross for us, that you shed your blood etc".

The Father didn't do that, the Son did! But the person (sadly sometimes a Pastor) just flows on in the prayer without realizing he's mixed-up about Who did what. If you asked him if he believes the Father died for our sins on the cross, he would straight away declare "of course not, Jesus did". But his confusing prayer is trotted out as he fires away running all sorts of Biblical themes together without really paying attention to what he's saying. Sorry if this sounds harsh, but it's quite common. You'd be surprised. If we think prayer is important, we should be diligent and serious about its content.

Measured prayer can be summarised like this:

- ♦ It definitely doesn't mean "ritual" praying or cold words
- ♦ But it does mean a kind of "deliberate" use of Spirit-led words and phrases
- ♦ Think about the words you pray; search the Spirit for just what to say
- ♦ Be willing to move out of the box of the usual topics or phrases we all use
- ♦ **"The prayer that doesn't move your heart probably doesn't move God's either"**
- ♦ This saying is true of extemporary prayer, but also fits "measured" praying
- ♦ Try it!
- ♦ Methodists were called that because they had METHOD without the dead ritual of it. They didn't ignore the moving of the Spirit, but were still ordered.

2. Next we take a look at "**Inclining**". This is when we take note and pay close attention to what is actually being prayed, not simply listening to someone. **Inclining** is when you "lean into" the prayers as it were. We see this attitude in Joshua 24:23. "Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to YHWH the God of Israel."

- ♦ Read too Psa 78:1 / Psa 119:36. "*Incline*" in Hebrew means **to bend to it, extend into, stretch out**, just like a person intently leaning forward in a lecture to take hold of the teaching. A person only does this when they're captivated by what's being said.
- ♦ Body language shows you're interested in the subject (has a Biblical truth to it)
- ♦ Link "onto" the words; find a balance between the truth of the words and your imagination, but DO NOT let your imagination run free. Rely on the Holy Spirit, not you!
- ♦ Listen to God before you pray (this is foremost a recognition of dependence on God). Don't rush into prayer, WAIT to hear what Heaven has got to say first!

3. Don't ask the Father for anything, instead speak of His attributes!

- ♦ Today's society focuses on self too much ("selfies / you're worth it").
- ♦ This has crept into many of our so-called "worship" songs (worship is telling the Father how great His Son is) but a lot of songs still have the focus on "us" - "Lord I want more of you" / "Refresh **ME**" / "Move amongst **US** oh God". Check it out next Sunday it might surprise you.
- ♦ Learn the difference between WHEN to focus on our needs, and WHEN to focus on Him.
- ♦ Put aside (for a season) the use of words like "my", "me" and "I" (unless urgent).
- ♦ Try this for a week - see what difference it makes, it may startle you!

I once asked the congregation to NOT ask for anything at all in their prayers for a week, and to come back the following Sunday and share what had happened. The outcome was quite remarkable. At first people found it hard to adjust to not ask, but after a couple of days it clicked - they spent time telling God how wonderful and gracious He was.

For most of the people there were substantial changes in their lives, and some were very dramatic. Long held issues of regret, spite towards others, even some addictions, were dealt with - whereas I spent many hours of counselling without getting far at all in helping them. Though perhaps that reflects more on my lack of counselling ability!

4. His purposes should be acknowledged foremost.

There's a marked difference between the **Plan of God** and the **Purpose of God**. The former is often preached in Bible-believing churches. It is about Jesus' death and the sin penalty paid by His blood, about forgiveness, salvation and acceptance by the Father. All the Gospel things we know so well.

However, while the **Plan** is well known and mentioned, the **Purpose** isn't so commonly taught. Salvation is the PLAN of God, but it obviously isn't the "everything" of God. The PURPOSE is about the maturing of the saints, about the grander perspective the Father has for us beyond salvation. It's summed up in the awesome words "**bringing many sons to glory**" (Heb 2:10).

Read Ephesians slowly and intently - and hold on for a wonderful revelation ride! The letter is all about the Purpose, the grandeur of the event, the predestined glory yet to come, the astonishing intention of God for us - "**according to His purpose**" (Eph 1:11).

Just imagine how our spiritual life would change if we relished the PURPOSES of God in prayer, if we rejoiced in what is to come, and praised Him for the greater unseen things He's prepared for us! Not just "heaven" and our wanting to enjoy it, but the issues of full adoption (Eph 1:5), the administration of the mystery (3:9), the ability to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth (3:18), and even the amazing being "**filled up to all the fullness of God**" (3:19).

These are grand and magnificent things that await us. Let's incorporate them into our daily prayers and "**keep our eyes on things above**" (Col 3:1-2). This will make our prayers rich beyond understanding!

- ◆The bigger, grander things are the more important.
- ◆One of the great themes of the NT is "Perfection" (Jhn 17:23 / 2 Cor 13:9 / Col 4:12).
- ◆This can be translated as "Completion" or "Maturity".
- ◆That Christ might formed within us (2 Cor 4:16 / Gal 4:19).
- ◆Father's purpose for us is to be mature, to no longer be children but Sons (Rms 8:28-29).
- ◆Pray specifically for personal and corporate Maturity, Fullness, Wisdom, the Mind of Christ.

So let's press on, willing to be challenged, and to honour prayer as more than just asking and wanting. There is of course a place for that, but you will find as you grow older and wiser in the things of God your attention swings away from the earth realm and you'll focus more on the wonder and glory purposed for us by the Father.

I hope these words by John Bunyan may help keep the focus.

**"When you pray let your heart be without words,
rather than your words without heart"**

In Jesus,
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