

1

The Problem With Prayer

*Lord, till I reach yon blissful shore,
No privilege so dear shall be
As thus my inmost soul to pour
In prayer to thee.*

*Charlotte Elliott
1789–1871*

He'd done it again. For the third time in five minutes he'd wandered off the track—so far off, in fact, that he couldn't even remember where he'd been. Pulling himself upright and adjusting the bed sheets around him, he thought it ridiculous that he should have such a problem—absolutely inexcusable. At no time in his life had prayer come easily. Now with eyes clenched shut, he grieved, "Hard to believe I've been a Christian for ten years, and still I have to force myself to pray."

Many Christians experience this same frustration in their prayer lives. New believers, mature Christians, pastors, famous evangelists—no group is exempt. Many great leaders would be embarrassed to admit their lack of success with prayer. And so it is with most of us. We know that prayer is one of the greatest blessings God offers, but we also know that it is a source of frustration and guilt. Stories that tell of dramatic answers to prayer set our hearts yearning for the same. A life filled with prayer is a life of great blessing. But such fulfillment seems to come to only a few.

The rest of us, crippled by frustration, simply put prayer out of our lives. Hectic schedules and demanding responsibilities push

conversation with God into the dark and dusty corners of our lives. When we slip in a word of prayer now and then, we cannot help but sense how shallow it is. This harsh reality raises a number of questions: Can Christians hope to experience the blessings of prayer more fully? Can their prayers ever become more like what God wants them to be? What's the problem with prayer? In the chapters that follow, we will look for answers to these questions, answers that will equip Christians to enjoy more completely the many riches of prayer.

Where do we go for help? Because God's Word is our guide in all matters of faith and life, we look in the Bible for solutions to our problems with prayer. Immediately our hearts turn to the Lord's Prayer or a few other passages in the New Testament, but the Bible has much more to say about prayer than this. The Old Testament Psalms, for example, contain more prayers than any other portion of Scripture. They comprise a collection of inspired prayers that God's people sang and recited in all kinds of circumstances: during worship, while traveling along the road, and in the daily activities of life at home. They project the full range of human emotions, from exuberant joy to frantic despair. Sadly, believers often ignore the Psalms and many other passages in which the Bible teaches us how to pray. In this study, however, we will not limit ourselves to a few well-known passages. We will take a close look at the Psalms and other less familiar portions of the Bible and find many new insights into this area of our lives.

Before going further, we must stop and carefully define what we are talking about. The word "prayer" can refer to many things. A child's poem of thanks before dinner, passing thoughts directed toward God, deeply felt laments, and joyous praises are commonly identified as prayer. Occasionally, the meaning of the term is stretched to include other sorts of activities—a painting, a musical recital, or a liturgical dance. Most people will agree, however, that these are extraordinary uses of the word.

From a biblical point of view, prayer may be defined as *a believer's communication with God*. This definition suggests three main elements in prayer: (1) *God*, (2) *the believer*, and (3) *the communication*. If one of these components is missing, prayer cannot occur. A quiet church building may not be accessible; we may not have much time;

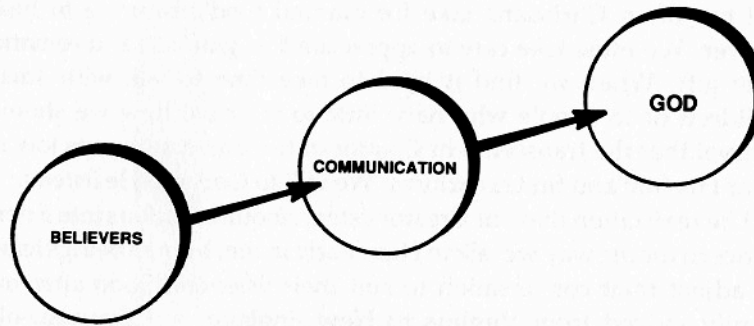


Fig. 1.1. The Elements of Prayer

friends and prayer partners may not be around. But as good and helpful as these elements may be, none is essential to prayer. Take away God, the believer, or the communication, however, and prayer becomes impossible. Without God no one listens; without the believer no one speaks; without communication nothing is said (see fig. 1.1).

These three elements are essential for fruitful and fulfilling communication with God. Ignoring any one of them paralyzes prayer, but attending to them all will move us toward a more vibrant prayer life.

The Recipient of Prayer

According to our definition, the first element of prayer is God. Every Christian at one time or another wonders exactly what role God plays in prayer. Scripture teaches that God has many roles. For example, as the Lord and giver of life, God sustains us, making it possible for us to pray. More than this, He forgives sin that would otherwise prevent us from approaching Him. Perhaps His most significant role, however, is that He receives our prayers. As the psalmist wrote,

Hear my prayer, *O God*;
listen to the words of my mouth (Ps. 54:2).*

*All Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Italics indicate emphasis added.

All too often Christians take for granted God's promise to hear prayer. We must take care to appreciate this gracious and remarkable gift. When we find it hard to take time to talk with small children or to people who have little to offer us, how we should marvel that the transcendent Creator of the universe stoops low to hear His frail and finite creatures. We talk to God and He listens.

The realization that our Creator listens should shock us into a new concern for the way we talk to Him. Early in life, human beings learn to adjust their conversation to suit their listeners. Soon after my family moved from Virginia to New England, my five-year-old daughter began speaking English in two distinct ways. With her mother and me, she spoke with the slight southern accent characteristic of our home in Virginia. With her neighborhood friends, however, she talked as if she had lived all her life in the suburbs of Boston. Adults make similar adjustments in their conversations. Husbands and wives converse in ways they would never talk with others. Employees speak to each other differently than they talk to their employer. Our ordinary conversations reflect our attitudes toward the listener, and the same is true in prayer. Our thoughts and attitudes about God largely determine how we speak to Him.

Notice the prayers of someone from a church background different from your own. Believers who think of God primarily as a close personal friend will offer prayers that are very casual and informal. But if they think of God as the sovereign King of the universe, their prayers will tend to be more formal and reverent. Christians adjust their communication with God to match their perception of Him.

Our concept of God affects every aspect of our prayer life. Many Christians, for instance, are bored with prayer largely because their perception of God is so narrow. It is no wonder that we lose interest in prayer when we severely limit our conception of God. By emphasizing one or two of God's characteristics to the near exclusion of all the others, we unwittingly reduce Him to a two-dimensional, black-and-white picture. Imagine talking to a black-and-white sketch of a dear friend. Such a monologue would surely be monotonous and unrewarding. Sadly, prayer can become boring for the same reason. If we do not deepen our awareness of God and His many characteristics, our prayers will fall short of their full potential.

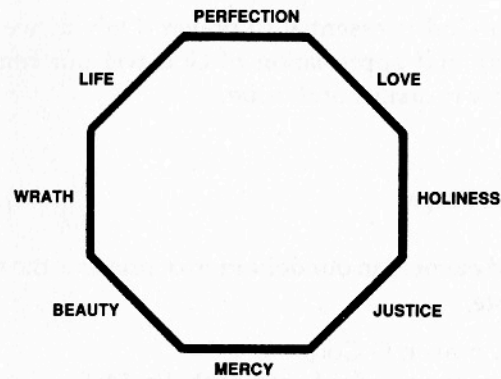


Fig. 1.2. The Wonder of God

The Bible describes God as mysteriously and wonderfully multifaceted. He is love, holiness, justice, mercy, beauty, perfection, life, wrath—to name only a few of His characteristics. All of God's attributes reveal different aspects of His personality. Depending on our circumstances, different dimensions of His character will mean more to us than others. Yet, at no time should the Christian be satisfied with a one-sided conception of God. For our prayers to be filled with life and vitality, we must always strive to deepen our awareness of God in all the ways He is revealed in Scripture (see fig. 1.2).

The Psalms illustrate the importance of focusing on the many sides of God's character. In their prayers, the psalmists mention many attributes of God. His reliability is the focus of one prayer:

To you I call, O LORD my Rock;
do not turn a deaf ear to me (Ps. 28:1).

Another psalm emphasizes His strength:

I love you, O LORD, my strength (Ps. 18:1).

Like the psalmists, we should learn to focus on the wondrous qualities of God as we pray. If we are hurting, we may look upon God's love and thereby experience the easing of our pain. If we are reeling from wrongs done to us, we may focus on God's justice.

A focus on God is essential to prayer. Only as we deepen our understanding and appreciation of God will our communication with Him grow in quality and value.

The Source of Prayer

The second element in our definition of prayer is the believer. The psalmist wrote,

Hear *my* prayer, O God;
listen to the words of *my* mouth (Ps. 54:2).

Prayer always involves a human source. God Himself ultimately gives us the ability to pray, but the human instrument still serves as the creaturely source of communication. Prayer emerges from the human mind and heart. Even when Christians use words already written or passed down by others, they adopt them as their own when they offer them to God. In this sense, we are the source of communication with God.

Because prayer finds its source in believers, we also should pay attention to ourselves as we pray. The more aware we are of ourselves, the more sincere our prayers will become. I once participated in a communication workshop for married couples. One of the most memorable lessons I learned was how to "speak for myself." In the group we discovered how frequently we fail to examine our own thoughts and feelings as we talk with our spouses. We concentrate on everything except clearly expressing what is deep within us. How little we know about ourselves and how poorly we express what we do know! Self-understanding and self-expression are fundamental to all fruitful communication. Communication with God is no different. We must learn how to "speak for ourselves" when we pray.

The psalmists are deeply aware of their own thoughts and attitudes in prayer. At times they express jubilation:

Praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD, O my soul (Ps. 146:1).

**WHAT ARE MY
ATTITUDES, IDEAS,
CIRCUMSTANCES?**

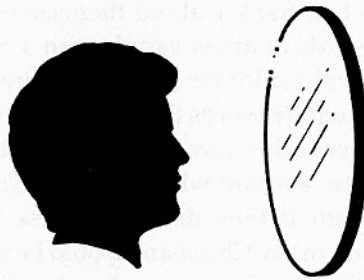


Fig. 1.3. Self-Awareness in Prayer

Sometimes they present strong desires:

All my longings lie open before you, O Lord;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
My heart pounds, my strength fails me;
even the light has gone from my eyes (Ps. 38:9-10).

At other times, they even admit to deep discouragement:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent (Ps. 22:1-2).

These examples illustrate how self-awareness can add a profound dimension to prayer. We must thoroughly assess what is going on within us: How do I feel? What am I thinking? What are my attitudes, ideas, and circumstances? (see fig. 1.3).

People involve themselves to varying degrees in their daily conversations. At times superficial responses will suffice—"How are you?" "Just fine!" We make these exchanges out of polite custom with little concern for sincerity. But at other times when we sense the magnitude of a situation, we feel the need to search inside ourselves and to express our more profound feelings. Who can be satisfied with clichés when a healthy baby is born to close friends? Who can hide behind polite superficiality when a broken marriage is

healed? Young men and women get to know each other only after they begin to talk frankly about themselves and their feelings. At times, even words of anger can deepen a relationship. Superficial conversation will suffice for some situations, but weighty and personal matters require words that stem from the heart.

Do our prayers arise from our hearts? Often Christians utter one trite phrase after another when praying. They mimic prayers they have heard even if they do not express their own thoughts or feelings. In fact, many Christians would be shocked to hear a prayer expressing attitudes of sorrow and severe disappointment. Instead, we expect a series of pious phrases that will get us safely through the ritual. Unfortunately, we often get just what we want—a mere ritual. If Christians want to establish deep, personal contact with God, they must forsake superficial prayer. Like the psalmists, we must examine and express ourselves as honestly and completely as possible.

The Words of Communication

Communication is the third element essential to prayer. Christians must also be conscious of their words when they pray. The psalmist makes this clear:

Hear my *prayer*, O God;
listen to the *words of my mouth* (Ps. 54:2).

No doubt, words are unable to express all that is in our hearts. But at such times we can take comfort in knowing that the Spirit understands us and intercedes on our behalf:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Rom. 8:26-27).

Despite the Spirit's work, however, we should be very concerned with our words—words that will either hinder or enhance our communication with God.

A funeral is no place to crack a joke. A library is not the place to shout a football cheer. To entertain, we may tell a story. To get information, we may ask a question. Unfortunately, however, Christians seldom use that much variety when they talk with God. They tend to follow one or two patterns for prayer no matter what their circumstances or intentions may be. Though one Christian's prayers may differ somewhat from another's, they generally follow similar patterns. Some believers use the design "Jesus, Others, Yourself" (JOY). Others follow the pattern "Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication" (ACTS). These models help many Christians, especially new believers, to balance the various parts of prayer. Yet, all models are limited in their ability to meet the diverse needs we experience. Even the Lord's Prayer is not to be used as a strict model for communication with God in all situations (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Although it is a rich resource for learning how to pray, the Lord's Prayer is only a summary outline, which Jesus gave as a general guide to prayer, not a specific rule. Jesus Himself prayed in ways that did not follow precisely the model of the Lord's Prayer (cf. John 17:1-26). No single model is able to communicate adequately all the concerns of the human heart.

For this reason, the Psalms serve well as examples of prayer. The psalmists lift up praises:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.
His love endures forever (Ps. 136:1).

They offer laments:

We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation (Ps. 90:7).

They express statements:

Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God (Ps. 43:4).

And they ask questions:

Will the Lord reject us forever?
Will he never show his favor again? (Ps. 77:7).

**MANY DIFFERENT THINGS
TO SAY IN PRAYER**

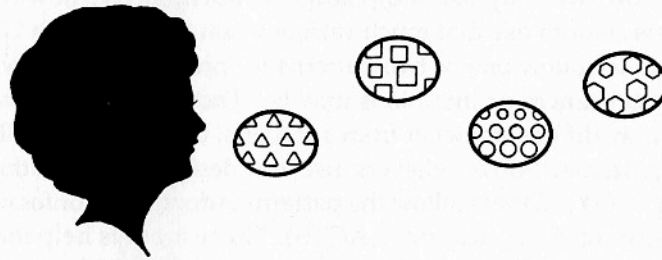


Fig. 1.4. Variation of Communication in Prayer

The psalmists used all kinds of expressions and patterns in prayer. And so should modern believers. A mother who has just seen her stillborn child may be unable to begin her prayer with adoration. She is free to express her grief and pain. A father does not have to confess his sins before giving thanks for the accomplishments of his children. He may simply praise God. Following the example of the psalmists, Christians should vary the content and form of their prayers according to their circumstances and their responses to them (see fig. 1.4).

Variety in prayer is vital to effective communication with God. I remember taking a long bus trip as a teen-ager and being assigned to sit with someone I did not know very well. Being separated from my friends was bad enough, but my partner made the trip almost unbearable. All she could talk about were her good grades in school. Every time I tried to change the topic, she returned to this same theme. Needless to say, I was miserable. Following the same patterns again and again will destroy a prayer life, just as surely as it destroys earthly conversation. The same words, said in the same way, at the same time, over and over will drain all the life out of communication with God. Yet, if we learn from the psalmists and other biblical figures and begin to imitate the freedom and creativity of their prayers, then we can expect our communication with God to grow richer and more inspiring by the day.

The chapters that follow will look carefully at the three crucial elements of prayer outlined in this chapter. By closely examining

what the Bible says about God, ourselves, and our communication, we can begin to overcome our frustrating problems with prayer and experience more fully the rich blessings of talking with God.

Review Questions

1. What is the definition of prayer given in this chapter? What is the biblical support for this definition? Distinguish between the essential and nonessential aspects of prayer.
2. Why may we say that God is the recipient of prayer? How can God's listening role influence the way we pray? Why do we continually need to deepen and clarify our concept of God?
3. What role does the believer play in prayer? Why should believers pay attention to themselves in prayer? Can we pay too much attention to ourselves?
4. What role do our words play in prayer? Why are they important? Why do we need variety in the way we say our prayers?

Exercises

1. Carefully read Psalm 56:1-13. (a) List three ways the psalmist thinks about God. (b) Also note three ways he shows awareness of himself in prayer. (c) Finally, list three ways in which this prayer differs from your usual pattern of prayer.
2. Read the following prayers. Compare and contrast the attention paid to God, the focus on the believer, and the styles of communication.
 - YOU who have ordered this wondrous world, fill my heart with trust in You at all times. May I commit myself to Your never-ending purposes for this life and the life to come. Amen.
 - LORD of all purity and goodness, we pray that You will

purify our lives. Help us each day to know more of You, and use us to show Yourself to others. Make us humble and loving; make us ready for service. We ask not only that You will keep us safe, but also that You will keep us ever loyal. Amen.

3. Using the form below as much as possible, write out a prayer in which you commit yourself to focusing attention on God, yourself, and your communication. Be sure to mention why you hope to do this. Then read this prayer before the Lord.

O Lord, as we begin this study of prayer, we seek Your grace.

Help us to focus our hearts on You because _____
(Express your reason for this request.)

Help us to look carefully at ourselves because _____

(Express your reason for this request.)

Also help us to give attention to what we say because _____

(Express your reason for this request.)

As You bless us in this endeavor, we will _____
(Make a promise to God.)

_____ . Amen.

Extended Exercise

Before three meals this week, take a few moments to write down a four- or five-sentence blessing for the meal. Be sure to vary your focus on God, yourself, and the kind of prayer you are offering. Keep these prayers and compare them through the week. Ask yourself, "How am I deepening my awareness of God, myself, and my prayers?"