

**Prayer:
Responding to God
Book 1**

by Robert B. and Marjorie W. Hall

A COMPASSbook from BIBLE READING FELLOWSHIP

Published by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380
Winter Park, Florida 32790-0380
www.biblereading.org
Printed in U.S.A.

The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Bob and Marjorie Hall originally wrote *Prayer: Responding to God* some years ago. Despite its timeless message, the Bible Reading Fellowship wanted it updated and re-formatted into two COMPASSbooks, which required quite a bit of work on the Halls' part. Loving Christians that they are, they graciously reworked the material into its present form.

Book 1 deals with what prayer is; getting quiet before God; ways of speaking to God; adoration, praise, and thanksgiving; confession; petition; and meditation, contemplation, and prayer language.

Book 2 deals with ways of hearing God speak; the obedient pray-er; hindrances to prayer; prayer groups; and what we may expect of prayer.

Although Bob Hall is the primary writer, his material definitely comes with much input from Marjorie.

The Bible Reading Fellowship is very grateful to the Halls for letting us use their outstanding teaching on so many aspects of prayer as COMPASSbooks.

PREFACE

The description of prayer in the Episcopal Prayer Book looks at the subject of prayer in a rather different way than do most of those who use that book. Prayer is responding to God, says the book. It is not a matter of telling God something that He would not otherwise have known in order to induce Him to do something that He would not otherwise have done.

Marjorie and I are people of prayer—I am a man of prayer, she is a woman of prayer—not because we are especially holy but because we are needy. We need to pray and we need what prayer brings.

This book of ours on prayer joins a very large company of other such books. Its contribution to the literature on prayer is not based on our deep knowledge of that literature (although we have read a bit) but on our continuing experience of prayer. If some of our readers find in our experience and understandings of prayer that which speaks to their condition in this pilgrimage, then we will be content to have helped as we have been helped.

This is not our final word on prayer, it is merely where we were on the day that this was printed. We have talked about prayer with folks in 90% of the dioceses of the Episcopal Church. We have read, and discussed with each other, what we have read on prayer. And I suppose we will keep on reading and talking and learning and discussing as long as we are on this side of the veil that prayer pierces. How great is our God, that our growth need never stop, neither here nor hereafter!

Live Oak, Florida

Bob and Marjorie Hall

CHAPTER 1

WHAT PRAYER IS

Prayer is communication with God. By prayer we express our thoughts to God and He expresses His thoughts to us. What a marvelous thing this is! There are scientists at work today examining radio waves from the stars, trying to determine if there is any pattern to the frequencies, and modulation of frequencies, that come sputtering into their instruments from outer space. Think how people would react to headlines if it ever became established that there is someone out there trying to communicate with us! Think what it would mean if a non-earth being were able to tell us who he is, and we were able to respond. Yet the Lord of the universe, the Creator and Author of all things, has been in communication with Earthlings for centuries. Has the familiarity of this communication caused us to lose our sense of awe and wonder at the process, to say nothing of our awe and wonder at the Creator Himself?

Perhaps the one sidedness of much of our communication with God has reduced the whole matter to a human level, and thus taken the awe out of it. If by prayer we simply mean communication with God on *our* part, a communication in which we do all the talking, all the thought sharing, then it is not surprising that this doesn't seem so very wonderful anymore. After all, we communicate constantly, we make our needs known to anyone who will listen, and to some who won't. If prayer for you is no longer something to be approached with awe and expectancy, ask yourself if your prayer has become simply a matter of broadcasting your thoughts to outer space with little or no real belief that anyone is out there to receive them. That would get boring after a while, indeed.

Years ago, I had my first adventure with amateur radio transmissions. My first transmitter was one I built myself with a pair of 6L6 tubes. It produced about 75 watts of power, or was supposed to. I tested it by using a 75-watt light bulb for an antenna and found

it would light the bulb to full brilliance. Then I hooked it to an outdoor antenna. I tapped out the Morse code with my key, “CQ, CQ, CQ de (from) W5VET.” Again and again I sent this message, seeking anyone who would respond to my call. Imagine my excitement when I paused to listen and heard in my receiver the welcome sounds, “W5VET de W5AAE,” and knew that somewhere another “ham,” whose call was W5AAE, had heard my tapping and was ready to communicate.

I am sure that nothing makes prayer real to us more than some evidence that it is indeed “two-way” communication. To hear God’s answer to our petitions (even if the answer is No) assures us that there is “someone” out there, that our prayers are being heard, that we are not being so foolish as to talk to the wall, and that Someone cares enough to evaluate our petition and give a considered answer.

This kind of thinking moves us past one of the most primitive of prayer problems. If you see prayer simply as a way to get the universe to do your will, then you will consider prayer answered when you get what you want and unanswered when you don’t. This is such a common view of prayer that the phrase “my prayers were answered” usually means, in our language, that someone got what they asked for.

A first step in understanding prayer as a communication with a caring Being is to realize that such a Being may accept our request, deny it, defer it, or even refuse to communicate about it until we have thought it through a bit more.

Since prayer has to do with communicating with God, the next step involves knowing something about the nature of God. Lewis McLaughlin, a Scottish Presbyterian, once remarked that the mind of God is sheer perfection. We could not imagine any way in which to improve the mind of God. But we constantly think up ways in which we would like to *change* it! Given this sort of beginning, how would you approach the subject of prayer? If the mind of God, with which you wish to communicate, is already absolute perfection, prayer becomes a way of allying yourself with this perfection, of seeking to know that mind’s will for your life, of reaching out for understanding, and the power to live out your understanding.

A third thing that is necessary to realize about prayer is that God's part of it, what God is saying to you, or His reaching out to you, goes on all the time. God is the aggressor, the initiator, He has the ball, not you. You do not even remember to pray without the prompting of the Holy Spirit. If we come to prayer with the realization that it was His idea in the first place, our attitude toward prayer will surely be different. Just as radio waves are coursing through the room where you are right now, waiting for the proper device to intercept them and decode their message, so our Father God is reaching out to each of us in prayer right now, waiting in His love for our response.

Let us not think that because we have turned on our radios that we have created the radio program. It will go on even if we turn off our set. So it is with God. His love pours out over His world, a world which is not much more aware of that love than it is of the unseen radio waves that constantly disturb the ether. God has made us capable of response to that love. He has made us free to respond to, or reject it. Only as we tune in can we begin to receive what our Creator has designed and poured out for us.

Before we can deal properly with what prayer is, we have to take note of what man is. Prayer is communication between man and God. Theology helps us with prayer because theology helps us to know the other Person in our prayer relationship. Anthropology, or perhaps psychology, is important, too, in this respect. We have to realize, for example, that man's earliest prayer efforts were probably born out of fear, fear of an angry god who sent the forest fire, lightning, flood, hurricane, drought. Such a god needed to be placated, appeased. Since he couldn't be fought successfully, man did what he could to make peace with him, offering him what seemed of value to man.

There is still a lot of that primitive fear psychology inherent in man's prayer life. God has revealed to us a very different nature from the one attributed to Him by primitive man, but fear still stimulates many to prayer.

Then we must deal with the heavenly Father concept that is simply a child's view of an indulgent earthly father writ large. Just as the child could expect his father to get up out of a warm bed and get

him a drink of water in the middle of the night simply because he asked, so we whose bodies have grown up, look for similar indulgences on the part of our heavenly Father, even when we are quite big enough to go get the water ourselves. The child's relationship with her father is very one sided. The father exists to serve, the child to be served. As we grow and mature in our human bodies, we become less and less dependent, and take more and more responsibility for our well-being. Finally, we become entirely independent of our human father, stand on our own two feet, and owe him only love and affection.

Our relationship with God stops somewhere halfway through this process because we can never outgrow God, never become independent, never address Him as an equal. Perhaps the analogy of kindergarten and high school might serve. At five years of age there are many things we cannot do for ourselves, much for which we are dependent on father and mother. By the time we get to high school we do most things for ourselves. We have been given much freedom, but we still have an obligation of love and obedience. Perhaps we might think of our relationship with God as that of the ideal teenager. We have been given a life full of promise; we are learning skills and growing in wisdom, stature, and in strength. This is, of course, a time when we have difficulty separating our growing independence from an impatience with parental authority. The fact that many parents have difficulty in letting us go compounds the problem.

The ideal balance exists somewhere, a balance in which we take more and more responsibility for our own actions, preserving our respect, affection and love for our parents. In matters where they are competent and we are not, we obey even when we do not understand the reasons.

With our heavenly Father, many of us have a severe case of arrested development. We still want what we want when we want it, and we rather expect Father to give it to us. We also want our freedom, total and complete, and only in an extremity are we willing to bargain a certain amount of obedience in return for a certain desperately needed gift.

Be honest now about your attitude toward your heavenly Father. Are you deeply concerned to know His will for your life so that you may live in that will? Or do you see God as “Mr. Fixit,” the heavenly Daddy who will bring the universe around to suit your convenience and desires? One way to check this is to see how much of your prayer time is spent in *self*-centered prayer, and how much in *God*-centered prayer—praise, adoration, contemplation, etc.

Habit is a great thing if right habits have been cultivated. Habit frees us from the necessity of making decisions on recurring matters each time they come up. We can simply “get in the habit” of doing things a certain way, and thus carry them out unthinkingly. There are good prayer habits just as there are good habits in any other part of life. There are also some very bad prayer habits. The fact that you are reading a book on prayer shows that you are open, in some degree, to reexamining your prayer habits. You might ask yourself if those things which you do every day, without thinking much about them, are indeed the things you should be doing at this stage in your spiritual development.

The word “development” is the key to the other point we would make about prayer habits. You are changing, you are not the same person you were a year ago, or perhaps even a day ago. Thus, the communication you have with your heavenly Father should be changing, too. Rote prayers, or prayers said from memory, or read from a prayer book, have their place in the total prayer life of each of us. There are prayers that are stated better than anything you or I could think up. Care is needed to avoid saying these prayers just as a matter of habit. They must remain a fresh means of communication with God, or they become mere sounds that you mumble without thinking much about.

A prime illustration is the Lord’s Prayer. Can you say that prayer all the way through putting meaning in every word? Of course you can, but do you? I heard of a Roman Catholic priest who said that before he died he wanted to say one perfect “Our Father.” It is not that easy with a prayer that is so familiar. Take a look at the prayers you say

habitually, and see if you are only saying these out of habit, or if you are truly communicating.

Let me say something on the other side of this question. We know that it is possible to communicate with God at a level below the conscious level. You may find yourself singing a little hymn of praise, when you weren't even aware that you were doing so. You may awaken in the night and find that you have been praising God in your dreams. Thus, there is no harm in prayers that become so habitual that you give little thought to them. These familiar prayers become a part of our total being, and involve depths of our make-up that perhaps we may find trouble lifting up to God in a consciously composed, new prayer.

The fact of habitual prayers should be a part of every prayer life. I don't mean that one should not consciously seek to "pray" every prayer that is said. I do mean that there are other values to be served. It is important sometimes just to "report for duty." Using the Episcopal Prayer Book, I say Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer every day. Since I have done this for years, I know these prayers so well that it is very easy to get through the whole process without giving it much thought. Sometimes I say to God, "Lord, it is blasphemous for me to mouth these words when my mind is not really on them. Perhaps it would be better if I gave up saying Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer except for those times when I can really concentrate on what I am saying." Each time I do this, it seems to me that God smiles and says, "No, my son, you go ahead and report for prayers, whether your mind is on what you are doing or not. When I want to speak to you, you'll be there." Of course I know He wants me to pay attention to what I'm doing, but when the familiar gets a bit hum-drum, He still wants me in my familiar place.

We want to underline the fact that God is the aggressor. The relationship between God and man is of *His* design, or it is not the right relationship. Man does not so much seek God as he seeks to respond to Him, to be found by Him. The Episcopal Prayer Book Catechism answers the question, "What is prayer?" by saying, "Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words." It is plain that God stands ready at all times to let the

relationship be the living, purposeful, powerful interchange with us that He designed in the beginning. If that relationship does not obtain, it is because we do not want it so. God always reaches out, God responds to the most hesitant first step.

Actually, it is man, made in the likeness and image of God, who is not content to be man, and who wants to be God himself. It is not that man wants the responsibility of running the whole universe. It is that he wants the privilege of ordering that part of the universe that touches his own life. Since his concern is partial, and his viewpoint is partial, his success in doing this is always limited, and may be disastrous. Even from his own selfish viewpoint, he needs the overview that only God can have. Unfortunately for those whose commitment is limited to seeking guidance to help them realize their own schemes, God's perfect will cannot be realized in the lives of men unless they also have His help, His empowerment.

We must deal in this study with our unwillingness to let God be God, with our inability to be who we are created to be without Him, and then with the means God has provided for the perfection of persons, namely prayer. Prayer is communication with God, two way communication in which God deals with us and we respond. It may be dialogue, in which God speaks, we speak, God speaks, we speak, and so on. It may be the lifting up of a need, the flow of power, a response of thanksgiving, etc. Not all prayer is spoken, certainly not all answers to prayer are verbal.

Some prayer is individual; some prayer is corporate, done by a group. Some prayer is verbal, some goes beyond words. We shall use the traditional concept of prayer as referring to our part, and answers to prayer as referring to God's part. We hope to make it clear that it is quite possible for God to speak to us in a way that demands that we answer Him.

There are forms of prayer, there are prayers that have been preserved in writing and which can be reused. There is free prayer by the individual and there is prayer said in common by a group. There are ways of preparing for it, and of following it up with action. There

are ways of tuning in, of getting quiet before God. There are hindrances to prayer and there is the living out of things already said.

Prayer is many things. While it is not a matter of reminding God of His duties, prayer is always addressed to someone; it is not merely wishful thinking. Prayer is the work of a God directed person, and can be a response to guidance triggered by prayer. It is not ministry, although all of us are called to it. Prayer is talking *with* God, not *to* God. It is verbalized expression of our relationship with Him. Without such expression, one may well ask how real the relationship is.

Remember the children's game called "Simon Says"? Someone gives commands to the group but no one has to obey unless the leader prefaces the command with "Simon Says." Christians pray to the Father God in the name of Jesus Christ, but when we use this sacred name as a talisman to *make* God do what we want, we err. Jesus did say, "whatsoever you ask in my name, I will do it..." (John 14:13). The word "name" here, however, has a much wider meaning than just the label by which Jesus was known. It refers to asking something in the faith that Jesus taught, in the love, belief, caring, kingdom awareness that was, and is, Jesus among us. Anything less than this smacks of a magic attempt to control God.

The Bible has much to say about prayer. In Job 21:15 the question is asked, "What is the Almighty that we should serve Him, and what profit should we have if we pray to Him?" In the 42nd chapter of Job we read that "the Lord accepted Job's prayer." Man does reach out, and God does respond.

Romans 8:26 reminds us that "we do not know how to pray as we ought." Thus we seek guidance even as we try to pray. Ephesians 6:8 counsels us to "pray at all times in the Spirit." Such prayer is to be frequent. 1st Thessalonians urges us to "pray constantly." It is to be offered everywhere, as 1st Timothy 2:6 points out, "In every place men should pray, lifting up holy hands." Prayer is directed to God, not man, as Matthew 6:5 makes plain, "And when you pray, you shall not be as hypocrites...enter into thine inner chamber and pray to the Father in secret...."

It sometimes seemed to people of the Bible that God was not listening, as in Lamentations 3:44, “Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through.” But again and again in the Scripture we find the history of believing men and women who urge us to pray...”I urge that supplications, prayer, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all persons” (1 Timothy 2:1); to pray believing, “Whatever you shall ask in prayer believing, you shall receive” (Matthew 21:22); for “the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects,” (James 5:16); “For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds...” (Matthew 7:18).

The Bible is a history of God and man and their dealings with each other, therefore the Bible is a history of prayer experience.

Doing the Word, Individually: Analyze, and write down, your own concept of prayer and “how it works.” How does this compare/contrast with what Bob Hall has said about prayer in this chapter? What will you do as a result?

Doing the Word in a Group: Discuss as a group, the individual responses called for above.

CHAPTER 2

GETTING QUIET BEFORE GOD

“O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength, by the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (Book of Common Prayer p. 832)

“Be still and know.” To know that He is God, to learn His will for our lives, to receive power and inspiration and the encouragement that comes from knowing that He loves us and can be with us in all that we think and say and do. How wonderful it is that our loving Father has made it possible for us to know, to know Him through His Son Jesus, to know peace, to know joy, to know what path we are to put our feet on, to know gifts that enable and empower us for the ministries to which we are called.

Yet, can you truly say that quietness and confidence are yours? Do you have a real sense of living in the revealed will of God? Do you have a strength not your own, a strength that will empower you to go beyond human abilities in carrying out a revealed divine plan for your life? This old prayer, based on Psalm 46, speaks of things that most of us only wish were true, only dream of seeing in our own lives.

God is faithful. His promises are not empty. The words of the Bible assure us that God has a will for our lives, that He reveals that will to us if we ask Him, and that He also empowers us to walk in that will. It is possible, then, to find in God that which we seek, to receive from Him that which we need, and to walk in His grace and power in a way not known to those who do not know Him.

In prayer, we are asking God to get us quiet, and help us know Him and His will. We are even daring enough to prescribe the way in which God is to do this: “By the might of thy Spirit lift us to thy

presence.” We should know that it is only with God’s help that we do anything acceptable to Him, but we do forget this. We shall be reminding ourselves of this basic fact in the pages ahead. Not only are we dependent upon God’s grace to do anything, but God offers this grace constantly. It is our job to be ready to receive that grace. God is the aggressor. Oh, how often we forget that. Our seeming search for Him is but a response to that which He has already done.

Returning to God is a constant process, just as our turning away from Him is, unfortunately, continued over and over. Our blessed Lord offers us a continuing state of grace, and we forsake it again and again for our own devices; hence the need for returning to Him constantly. I don’t believe that “rest,” in this case, means the cessation of activity so much as it means “remaining” in Him. We rest our case upon His promises. We rest content upon all He has said He will do. We return to God, and we come to rest in Him. Stopping and remaining in Him in order that we may find the quiet confidence that His strength brings.

Obviously God knows what is going on in His world all the time. Obviously we are always walking in His sight. Our prayer to be in His presence is really a prayer to be *conscious* of His presence, since we are fully present to His consciousness whether we pray or not. If only we could realize that we do not have to get God’s attention. We have His attention at all times; even the little falling sparrows have this. We are not aware that He is aware. Surely we are not, or we would not act as we do. Surely our unconsciousness of His continued attention to us is necessary for us to feel that He does not see our sins if we don’t come to Him in prayer. What else explains our reluctance to face Him when we have erred? Surely God does not turn His face from us; He is watching all the time. It is we who cannot bear to turn our faces toward the brightness of His when guilt floods our souls.

In returning and rest we shall be saved; from what are we to be saved? Does this speak of being saved from eternal damnation, or being saved from the consequences of our sins, or is it the more general state of being saved from ourselves? How much we need to be lifted out of ourselves, lifted out and upward toward beginning to become what He

created us to be. It is not in our own noisy working, or empty striving, that we will find the health and wholeness that He promises us. It is in a quiet reliance on Him who is the source of all power and might, who reigns in a majesty unapproachable by us except through, and by, the merits of His Son Jesus. We ask that we be lifted into that Presence by the might of the Spirit of Jesus, where we can sit in confident stillness, and know and be known by our Creator God, by our loving, gentle Savior, and by that indwelling and sanctifying Spirit who proceeds from them both.

Quiet in Galilee

Marjorie

Never having been much of a “thinker,” as I’m sure many would confirm, my imagination has never taken me off on the wild flights of fantasy that so many people apparently enjoy. I seem to have a sort of one-track mind. I think about what I’m doing at the moment, but it’s hard for me to go off, mentally, into another realm. Perhaps that is why what I want to describe now means so much to me.

There came a time in my life when my prayers had become somewhat humdrum; I found that there was a sameness every morning that was bordering on actual boredom. I was having to make myself pray. This troubled me because I knew that if I was going to talk with someone I love, and who loves me, I should not have to drive myself to do it. I should feel excitement and anticipation and expectancy—all the things that were no longer present in my prayer life.

One morning I was thinking of Israel and of the wonderful trips we’d had there. How near Jesus had seemed then! My mind wandered to the beautiful Sea of Galilee, and the hills surrounding it. One in particular, on which the Chapel of the Beatitudes now stands, seemed to stick in my mind. I have a special love for that part of the country, and since those hills are pretty much the same as when Jesus walked over them, I could more readily *see* him there in my mind.

Suddenly, in my mind’s picture, I was there—and Jesus was there with me. All at once I was not just *thinking* about that hill in

Galilee, I was *there!* I could feel the grass under my feet, and see the blue sky, and feel the breeze on my face. I could see Jesus standing before me, quietly waiting.

After the initial surprise I fell down on my knees. What else can one do before the Lord? I don't think I said anything at all, but just knelt there in confusion, and helpless awe. He let me kneel there for a moment, perhaps letting me collect myself a bit, and then put out his hand to take mine, and lifted me up to stand before him. His arms opened wide and enfolded me in the most completely loving and protecting embrace I have ever known. In a state of perfect peace and contentment, I once more found myself sitting on my bed, in my own home in the United States of America...but with a new sense of excitement and love.

For one who is not given to flights of fancy, this was a vivid, and very real experience that has colored my whole prayer life since. Being able to visualize Jesus, and “putting myself in the picture” so to speak, has indeed made me look forward to my prayer time with anticipation and expectancy.

Each morning after that first beautiful encounter, I went, in my inner mind, to that hill that overlooks the Sea of Galilee. Each morning Jesus was there to meet me, to listen and respond. Sometimes we sat on the grass together in silence. He held my hand—if that was what I needed—and I was strengthened. As you can imagine, it was a precious time to me. I came to depend upon it for sustenance.

Then there came a fly in my fragrant ointment. A friend gave me a book by Thomas Merton, written by a monk for other monks, on the subject of contemplative prayer. Not being a monk, I found it heavy reading, but for some reason I stayed with it. Then came a low blow. Merton said that we should not try to visualize, or conjure up, pictures of Jesus as a regular practice because it keeps us from going any deeper in our prayer lives. Oh no! I could not give up these precious visits with my Lord. They meant too much to me. I was so distressed that the tears came. Maybe Jesus wasn't really there at all if I was not supposed to be finding him. What if he wanted me to stop this silly nonsense and get on with deeper prayer? Maybe it was all just a

figment of my imagination, and was meaningless after all—but what could be deeper than a face to face visit with Jesus?

I was so troubled about this that I stopped making the trip to Galilee each morning. It was a great weight I carried with me, not knowing what to do about it. I had felt so strongly that these visits were a gift from God, and now the gift was gone, and perhaps never really had been given at all.

When I talked it over with Bob, he asked me why in the world I was reading a book for monks in the first place! Since I was not in that category, he said I was certainly not bound by the teachings of Thomas Merton. He suggested that I pray any way I wanted that was meaningful to me. I felt better, and reassured, but when I went hungrily to find Jesus on the hillside, nothing happened.

At a church conference sometime later, I was happy to renew acquaintance with a dear nun, of the order of St. Helena. Over breakfast in the busy, noisy coffee shop of the hotel, I told her my story, and the dilemma I was in. When I said, in finishing it, “I don’t know whether I should go there again or not,” she answered very simply, “Why don’t you ask Jesus?”

Well now, you may think that would be the first thing I would have done, but it had never occurred to me. It was as if she had turned on a light in a very dark tunnel. Why didn’t I think of that?

After the conference, when I was back in my own familiar surroundings again, I did just that. In the quiet of my bedroom, I went back to our hillside in Galilee—hesitant, because I was not sure I was supposed to be there. Then, wonder of wonders, Jesus was there at the top of the hill. He opened his arms and ran to meet me! My dear Lord *ran* to meet me, as if wondering where I had been so long. There was my answer. Finding him was what was important, not the method used to do it.

With his help, I came to understand that a repeated time of personal closeness *could* become a crutch if I depended on it too much. If I should come to believe that it is the only way I could talk to him, or that it was the only way I could feel his presence, then it would, indeed, be a block to further growth. So I pray in other ways now, but

when I feel the need of his personal nearness, or have something especially important to share, I can always find him there.

Some Mechanics of Being Still

Marjorie's closeness to her Lord, and her daily vision of him, is a gift that not all of us have. For me, too, getting quiet before the Lord is a necessary part of prayer. I can send up arrow prayers when I am far from quiet, but for my prayer *time*, for praying when I have the opportunity to get things the way I want them, I like to set up a situation that is conducive to prayer for me, too. In the morning, this means beginning my day with prayer. It's not quite so much a matter of giving God the "freshness" of me after a night's sleep, as it is of turning to God before any internal distractions have time to get going. I know that before the new day is one hour old, I will have picked up on the problems left over from yesterday, or faced the new ones of this day. It is helpful for me to center on God before that happens. Other prayers during the day will be said in the midst of activity; these I like to say before activity.

As part of getting quiet before the Lord involves my internal quietude, so another part involves external quiet. I am particularly sensitive to radios and TVs playing early in the morning when I'm trying to say my prayers. This seems to me an intrusion, one I don't care for in the early hours of the day, anyway. I know there are some people who can't stand silence, and who turn something on the minute they get up. I like silence, particularly early in the day. At our home the only sounds we hear early in the morning are bird sounds, and, occasionally, the sound of the highway not far away. When we traveled frequently in our teaching ministry, there were a variety of sounds, depending on the place and the hour. We'll deal with one way of handling sounds.

There is very little that is monkish about me, but silence and solitude for my prayer time I find very beneficial. Marjorie and I say our morning prayers at the same time, but in different rooms. When sharing a motel room we respect each other's privacy, even when we

cannot have the solitude. Often we have something we want to share from our Scripture or other reading, or we have a special prayer intention for which we want assistance, or company. We normally reserve these comments and requests for after the initial prayer time. I guess what I'm saying is that we both prefer to bring the Lord a clean slate, particularly in the morning; a life which has had no input of any kind to interfere with receiving what He wants to give.

Obviously, this kind of silence is a great privilege, and one we had only occasionally during the rearing of our children. One way I got my prayer time before input in those days was to get up before anyone else, a possibility for others, also.

I learned some things about quiet, internal and external quiet, whether I'm fortunate enough to have external silence or not. I began with a simple drill, which I learned to shorten greatly after a month or so of practice. Since I have kept it up, I now have the facility of getting quiet before God in a matter of seconds, something for which I formerly could only envy my wife, who has a great ability in this matter.

I began by getting my body quiet, not too big a job early in the morning. I did this in cycles, using my breathing as a basis for counting. Let me say, somewhat parenthetically, that breathing is a pretty good indication of how quiet you are. The amount of oxygen you need varies with your level of activity. However, even the thought of activity, or for that matter, even thoughts with irritating content, can increase your oxygen needs. So getting quiet inside and out will reduce both the depth of your breathing and its frequency. Your breath will get smaller and smaller until it is barely perceptible. Remember, however, that breathing is one of the bodily functions that can be either automatic or volitional. Be aware of how your breathing slows, and becomes more shallow, but do not be so aware of it that you take over conscious direction of your breathing. Let it remain automatic.

Eastern religions have found it helpful to repeat a *mantra* in seeking to be quiet before God. The same word or phrase is repeated over and over, not so much for its meaning as for its sound. Being a Christian, I have no wish to use words from another faith, so I use the

Jesus Prayer. This ancient and much used Christian prayer is simply, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” It can be repeated endlessly and has great power, not from the sound of the syllables, but from the content of the phrases. It can be said comfortably with each breath, breathing in for part of the phrase and breathing out for another part, whatever is easy for you.

I began to get quiet by breathing and by saying the Jesus Prayer, almost silently. I did five breath cycles while trying to relax a different part of my anatomy each cycle. It might vary for you, but I found it useful to relax, in order, my feet, legs, hands, shoulders and neck. The last is the first to tense up if you are not quiet internally.

Then, still repeating “Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” with each breath, I set about dealing with external sounds. I tried to identify five sounds and accept them. Unlike some methods which would make you deaf to outside sounds, this method lets you hear them, identify them, accept them, and this takes away their power to disturb you. Birds, traffic noises, radiators, ticking clocks, whatever, you simply identify them and thus neutralize them. Identifying them assures you that these sounds have no claim on you and can be disregarded. The sound of a human voice is more difficult because it may have claims on your attention, either by speaking to you directly, or by content that arouses your interest. Thus voices and music are difficult but not impossible. You may find that this principle of accepting, and thus neutralizing, has other applications in your daily life: I did.

Now you have dealt with sensory input from hearing, and from touch (relaxing your body). Closing your eyes takes care of the optical input, the sense of smell usually presents no input. I tried to deal with taste but found this a distraction before breakfast.

In the process of dealing with your body and your environment, you will achieve a good deal of inner quietness. After the ten breath sequences described above, you may wish to continue quietly with the Jesus Prayer until you find the inner quiet you seek. One way to seek inner quiet is to picture yourself back behind your eyeballs, so to speak, looking out at the world. No one knows the

geographical location of the personality. Behind the eyeballs says it for me; you can find your own imagery. Getting to this point, then, being poised, alert and ready, does more to give me a blank slate on which God can write than anything else.

What happens next depends on whether you are reporting for duty, lifting up your praise, thanksgiving, confession, need, or meditating on some subject. We'll get to these details presently. Suffice it to say that most of us need a proper discipline of getting *still* in order that we can *know*.

There is, of course, real value in just getting still, for its own sake. We need periods of quiet; we need simply to rest. Most of the rest during our active days is done by distraction rather than by cessation of all activity. We go on our coffee break and we talk about something else for a change. Change is good, but complete inaction is better. Once you learn to get quiet before the Lord you can claim two or three minutes away from distraction, several times a day, and restore a great measure of your early morning efficiency just by stopping, and resting in Him. You don't necessarily have to talk to Him; a companionable silence is therapeutic, too. Nor do you need to go outside the Christian religion to do this. The Father God of the Christian is perfectly capable of granting His beloved rest in the name of Jesus. Try it and see.

Doing the Word, Individually: Follow one of the procedures for being still before God outlined in this chapter. Write down what you did and what the results were.

Doing the Word in a Group: Discuss the method or methods each of you use in your daily "quiet time" and/or in specifically practicing contemplative prayer or meditation.

CHAPTER 3

WAYS OF SPEAKING TO GOD

When we refer to prayer as a way of speaking, we might be on firmer ground if we referred to it as a way of expressing ourselves. Not all prayer is verbalized, as we shall see. All prayer does seek to communicate, or to express a relationship; it tries somehow to bring into being for another that which first existed within ourselves. With God, this is a response, as we said in the last chapter. God does that which calls forth from us a response, a response which we try to express in some way. This expression we call prayer.

For most of us, it is important to verbalize, to get our vague prayer thoughts into words. These words can be merely thought; or they can be said, sung, written down, or even acted out. Our thinking is likely to be muddy until we can verbalize it; our yearnings are vague until they be expressed with some specificity. Occasionally, people will say, “I know what I mean but I don’t know how to put it into words.” They will know more clearly what they mean when they have reached the point of expressing it in words.

Since God is perfectly able to understand our most embryonic, half formed thoughts, the purpose of being more specific is related to our side of the prayer cycle. We need to be specific, not to inform God, but to clarify our own situation. The more specific we are, the better able we are to receive what comes as a result of our prayers. Once we realize this, we begin to see that we need not hesitate to repeat prayers. It is not that God needs to be continually reminded, but that we do. Whether we repeat a prayer of praise because God continues to be praiseworthy, or whether we repeat a prayer of petition because we need to remain open to what God is giving us, repeated prayers speak to our needs, not God’s.

Much prayer is done mentally, much is done in whispers. This is an acknowledgment that God does not need volume to get our message. Sometimes a little volume helps us, so we do say prayers out

loud, even when we are all alone. Some people sing their prayers, and it is in this way that hymns are born. Some people write down their prayer thoughts, not so much to keep a record of them as to express them more definitely. Others are able to get beyond words to express their prayer thoughts. These people use art forms, such as music, dancing, painting, or sculpture to speak more clearly than they can with words. Christian action, the way we relate to, and serve others, can express our prayer thoughts. Indeed some prayer is not real until it has been lived out.

When prayer has been written down, it is sometimes available to others to use as their own. Sometimes prayers said in a group fall into a form that others find useful enough to copy. Many ancient prayers began this way and were later written down. Such prayer is not good simply because it is old; it has been preserved because people found that it said something they wanted to say. There is nothing wrong in using another person's words to express your own needs or aspirations. Our Lord gave us only one prayer to pray, and he probably meant that one illustratively. The Holy Spirit has given us many other prayers through the ages that we find helpful as we put our own prayer thoughts into expressive words.

Those religious expressions set to music that we call hymns and spiritual songs are also important ways of broadening our prayer life. They have the added advantage of allowing us to join with others to add beauty to our praises and our petitions.

Scripture gives us a rich source of prayer expressions which have come down to us precisely because they say something that we need to say. The Psalms, the old Jewish hymns, made up the first hymnal of the Christian Church, and they are widely used today, both said and sung. It is not too much to urge that every Christian's daily prayer diet include at least one selection from the Psalter. Some people find it very helpful to memorize some of the promises of the Bible and repeat them as part of their prayers. The Scripture is full of prayer, and promise.

I think it is important to strike a balance between structured prayer and free prayer, between the written and the extemporaneous.

It is a rare person whose prayer life cannot be enriched by those prayers which have come to us from others. There are those whose prayer lives would be greatly broadened if they would launch out and compose their own. Always in our spiritual life we find this need for balance between the personal and the corporate, between the working out of our individual relationship with God, and our life in the religious group.

One of the great values of written prayers, used in a structured form, is that they provide a sort of flywheel to keep us going when we are temporarily in the spiritual doldrums. As an Episcopalian, I say Morning and Evening Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer every day. These forms have become so familiar that I can say them all from memory. I use them as a basis for my time with God because I can, and do, pray them even when I don't feel like praying at all. This exercise in duty and discipline frequently is the means of restoring me to a more personal communication with my Lord.

Written prayers also give a balance that is far too often lacking. Frequently we go to God in prayer when we are troubled, or when something particular is very much on our heart, and we don't take time to praise God, to thank Him, to confess our sins, or even to pray for others. Some structure in our prayer life is good to keep us on track—written prayers are very helpful in this respect. Any Christian bookstore will have books of prayers. The Episcopal Prayer Book is a treasure house of prayers, both ancient and modern.

Liturgical prayers are prayers said together by more than one person. The word "liturgy" comes from Greek words for laity and work. This is "the work of the people." A book of *Common Prayer* doesn't refer to "ordinary" prayer but to prayer said together, in common. In order for us to pray together we have these prayers reduced to writing. Then we may either speak them together in unison, or follow the prayer thoughts of the leader of the service as he or she leads us in prayer from the book. Some people think of this as a stifling kind of prayer, but it need not be. Into the written words, and the spoken words of the leader, individuals can put their own particular meanings. Often there are pauses to give even more time for this.

However, since the brain moves much more quickly than the mouth, it is possible to think of many things while saying only a few.

There is a power in group prayer that is not present in solo prayer. “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name,” said Jesus, “there I will be in the midst of them.” We do gather ourselves together for worship, to ascribe unto God the worth-ship that He undoubtedly has, for group petition, for group thanksgiving, for doing with others all the things that we have in common in our expressions to God. The highest form of this is found in “The Liturgy of the Holy Communion, the Eucharist,” the Lord’s Supper. This is taken by most of the historic churches to be the primary and basic service of worship that Christians do together.

The Holy Communion as practiced by the majority of Christians consists of two parts. In the first part the people proclaim and respond to the Word of God. This includes Bible lessons, hymns, sermon and perhaps a credal statement of faith. Next, the congregation prays for the church and the world. Then comes a prayer of *eucharist*, or thanksgiving, which normally recites the Scripture about the Lord’s Supper. And finally, minister and people share in the Body and Blood of Christ as received in the elements of the sacrament. The Holy Communion is a study all by itself and deserves broader treatment than we can give here. An understanding of the elements of prayer contained in the next chapter will deepen one’s appreciation of this basic sacrament.

Doing the Word, Individually: Make a list of as many different ways as you can think of that you pray.

Doing the Word, as a Group: Ask a clergy person to meet with you and to take you through an “instructed eucharist”—that is, an informal service of the Lord’s Supper in which each facet of the service is explained.

CHAPTER 4

ADORATION, PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

The principal kinds of prayer are generally considered to be adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and petition. In adoration we lift our hearts up to God, often silently, and worship before His throne. Praise has to do with the qualities of God, and is a way of telling God that we love Him, just because He is who He is. Thanksgiving has to do with the acts of God, and is a way of expressing our gratitude for those things which He does that affect us and the causes we care about. Penitence is a form of prayer which helps us acknowledge our own unworthiness, and seek the forgiveness which will allow us to move on from where we are to where we can be. Oblation means offering, and is a response to God's goodness that can be said in words or done in deeds. The two asking kinds of prayer are most familiar, intercession for others and petition for ourselves.

A balanced prayer life would contain the above elements. They are normally present in public worship, but not always in our private devotions. Thus it is good to understand and use these categories in order to be sure that we are not leaving out some vital element in our time with God. Being aware of balance also helps take care of imbalance, as in prayer lives that are too much centered on the "gimme" approach. If you will begin by telling God how wonderful He is, then confess that you have done less than He made you capable of doing, give thanks for all the gifts He has showered on you anyway, and then lift up those whose needs are upon your heart, you will find that when you come to your own needs, many of them have already sorted themselves out and need no further prayer.

Adoration—Praise

Adoration and praise, are probably the least understood of the types of prayer listed above. They are also the least used, outside of

public worship. (Worship is a way of praising God, telling Him how great we think He is). To come quietly before God, rejoicing just to be in His presence, seeking nothing but to be there and reflect His glory, this is a high level of response to God. God not only wants, He even commands us to bring our petitions and thanksgivings before Him. Adoration is the holiest prayer because it is the most godly; it is centered on God and not on us. Petition has to do with our needs, intercession with *our* friend's needs, thanksgiving with *our* blessings, confession with *our* sins, and even praise has to do with what *we* think is great about God. Adoration is a simple relating of the created with the Creator, and certainly not often enough done.

Praise is adoration "spelled out." Praise is normally put into words, and is an effort on the part of man to express his wonder and gratitude for the qualities of God. Here we must be careful or we slip over into thanksgiving, which is also a very important kind of prayer. It differs from praise in that it relates to God as He has done things for us; it is responding to God for what He does rather than for Who He is. The distinction is important. Ignoring this distinction has resulted in much confusion about how we are to respond to God in various circumstances.

If a wife prays, "Oh, God, I praise you for what you have done for my husband," she may have said "praise" but what she did was give thanks. To make matters a bit more difficult, sometimes we praise God for qualities that have been revealed by actions. We can praise the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, who "brought the children of Israel out of the land of bondage." Here our prayer thoughts are centered on the kind of God who performs such acts, rather than the act of bringing about the Exodus itself. It may seem a small point, but among certain groups of Christians today, most true praise has been lost by confusing it with thanksgiving. There was even a whole series of books written on "praise" which missed this distinction entirely.

Praising God sets up a relationship between us and God, a relationship of dependence, of obedience, of awe at His majesty. It has great use in putting us where we belong. A great deal of prayer simply

orders God about. Those who pray in that way need something to put them in their place before they move on to petitionary prayer.

Too, we need to separate the praise of God from the kind of patronizing praise we offer to others here on earth. We compliment people; we tell them that they have done well to spur them on to greater effort, and to reward faithful performance, as well as to express genuine admiration for what they have done. The latter is more the purpose of praising God. Praise expresses our absolute awe and wonder at the vastness, the mystery, the glory and the limitless power and purity and love of God. This needs to be expressed, and often, not for God's sake, but for our own. May we repeat that it has nothing whatsoever to do with our current state of affairs. It has everything to do with the unchanging, omniscient, omnipotent, and ever-loving God. We are not patting God on the back and saying, "That's nice, you did well." We are responding to One whose glory makes our finest words inadequate.

Praise is difficult for us because so much of life today tends to downgrade the majestic and awe inspiring, to explain it away, or to try to take it over. If you try to praise God right now you will find that three things happen in quick succession. First, you will try to thank Him, you'll say something like, "Lord, I just praise you for what you did for my son." Strike the word praise and insert the word "thank," as you should do nine times out of ten if you are one who likes to say, "Praise the Lord."

Then you will try to tell God how wonderful He is, and you will find yourself doing this in the words of Holy Scripture, or of a hymn of praise, or perhaps in the words of your church's prayer book. This is fine. These great praise phrases have come down to us and can be fitted into our mouths and adapted for our praises perfectly well. That's why they have been preserved instead of lost, because they say it so well.

Finally, and we all need to come to this, we try to tell God we love Him, tell Him how wonderful He is, in our very own words. We quickly come to realize our inadequacy. This is partly because true praise, or adoration, is so seldom practiced by today's Christian. Mostly

it is because it is impossible for the creature to praise the Creator without His help. So we invoke the aid of the Spirit of God to come and help make our praise adequate, as the Son of God has already made it acceptable. Just as no one calls Jesus “Lord” but by the power of the Holy Spirit, so no one can praise God in a way that will please Him without His help. “O God, forasmuch as without Thee we can do nothing that will please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.” (BCP p.180)

It may be that as we seek to praise God, acknowledge our inabilities to praise Him properly, and ask His help, that His Holy Spirit will teach us to praise Him in a language we never learned. This prayer and praise language is not the “gift of tongues” described in Acts 2, nor probably the one mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12. Those had to do with communicating God’s word to His people. This praise language is to help us communicate our praise and adoration to God, to help us describe a relationship that is beyond words with words that are beyond our ability. Such praise languages vary from day to day with some people; they are always available when God is sincerely sought. They are a matter of our private devotion, and no one else’s business. We need not have hands laid on us, we need not join any movement; we need only seek to adore God and ask His help to praise Him beyond our own capabilities. If we will then speak out confidently and let Him shape the sounds, a praise language may well appear. More on this at the end of Chapter Seven.

Perhaps the highest form of adoration of God is wordless. This form of contemplative prayer simply stands in awe and wonder before the majesty of God, aware of His greatness, and aware of our own smallness. To be conscious of that relationship, as well as to express that consciousness, is praise.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving also acknowledges that God is great and we are small, but it is tied to specific things that happen to us. Normally, one gives thanks for those things that happen that one considers good and

beneficial. You can establish the relationship of giver and receiver by thanking God for all things that happen to you, whether you like them or not. This is the subject of a number of books which teach that one ought to give thanks *for* all things as well as *in* all things. It needs to be said that this does not fit the doctrines of all denominations. If your Church holds that God does not willingly afflict nor grieve people, a position with much Scriptural background, you can hardly thank God for causing you to contract pneumonia. If you believe that God always wishes you well, you can hardly be consistent to thank Him for something you don't want, don't like, and are doing your best to get rid of.

The root of this difficulty does not lie at this point of conflict, but in other basic doctrines which seek to answer the seeming conflict of whether "if God *knows* a thing is going to happen, He *causes* it to happen." For people who have been schooled to believe that God loves them, wants good for them, etc., it is very hard also to believe they are to respond to tragedy by saying, "Thanks God, I needed that." Who needs tragedy?

However, that God can take a seeming human tragedy, and transform it by His love, is a fact of Christian experience. He doesn't have to cause the happening to show you how to use it for your ultimate profit. He doesn't have to cause you to have a heart attack to use it to motivate you to change your lifestyle. Our culture has come to use the catch-all expression "Act of God" to cover those accidents which humans are unable to prevent or which are caused by forces that humans cannot yet control. He is a God of law and justice, and there are inevitable results when certain things are done under certain circumstances. The fact that we do not yet understand the rules does not exempt us from the consequences of breaking them.

God is responsible for everything that happens in His universe. As Creator, Lawgiver, heavenly Father, all knowing, all seeing, all powerful God, nothing that happens is without relation to Him. On the other hand, our human minds have much difficulty with the matter of causation. We wrestle time and again with the question of evil. If God knows something is going to happen, and if He has the power to

prevent it from happening, does this not mean that He *allows* it to happen? That brings us to the second question. Isn't this the same thing as *causing* it to happen? If you answer 'yes' to both questions, you may appreciate the recent emphasis on thanking God for all things, both good and bad.

Another view holds that God is a God of law, that He created the universe and set forth its laws. He created human beings to live in this universe, and to be subject to these laws. Thus, the force of gravity which lets a man lie upon his bed without strapping himself in, will also break his leg if he falls off the roof. The law of gravity cannot be suspended to save one man without damaging others. It could be argued that God might have kept the man off the roof, and it can't be denied that God has that power, but as soon as God begins to take away the freedom of choice from us, we cease to be human. That seems to be another of God's laws. Those who seek God's guidance and protection may be open to hear Him saying, "Stay off that roof today, it's slippery." I can testify that somehow I don't seem to bump my head as much as I did before I sought daily to yield my life to His guidance. Our obedience isn't perfect, and our knowledge of His laws isn't complete, so bad things do happen.

We have a God who cares, and takes responsibility for His creation. Imagine the captain of a great ocean liner, responsible not only for the vessel and all its working, but also for the crew who live and work aboard her. Way down in the engine room, an oiler slips on a greasy floor plate and breaks his arm. That goes in the ship's log, the captain is responsible. The oiler may have fallen just beside a notice the captain had caused to put up saying, "Wipe up all oil spills immediately." A law of the ship may have been broken, but the oiler's arm is broken too. The sailor is now taken to sick bay, the arm is set, and his convalescence begins. The captain may drop by the sick bay and visit him, and may even suggest that the oiler take advantage of his enforced idleness to study for his bosun's exam. Out of the broken arm comes a promotion! Captains can do this, and God can too.

Thanksgiving for the good things of life is fairly easy. We simply need to be reminded constantly to give thanks. Our human

arrogance is quick to give ourselves the credit for those things for which God should be thanked. Others have worked harder and achieved less, for example. We do need to be reminded to give thanks *in* all things as well. There is no day so dark that we cannot reestablish our relationship with God by praising Him for His love and goodness, and by thanking Him for those things in the situation in which we can honestly rejoice. I don't mean the prayer that says ruefully, "Well, at least we can thank you, God, that it is not worse." I mean the prayer that says, "Thank you, God, for the strength you are giving me right now to bear this burden, for the knowledge that you care and are watching with me as I struggle, for the friends you have standing by, and for your love and support, etc."

It is good for us emotionally as well as spiritually to take stock of our blessings, at least daily, and to give thanks for them. For one thing, we need to remind ourselves that we have blessings, for the world tends to be utterly pessimistic. Most importantly, we need to relate these blessings to our relationship with God, and acknowledge Him as the source of all good. It doesn't take us very long to fall for the snare and delusion that we are the authors of our own good fortune, or indeed that it was fortune—that we just "got lucky." A life lived in God's will and love isn't lived in this way. Such a life, and all that happens in it, is constantly referred to God in thanksgiving, confession or supplication.

This can become a lifestyle in itself. The word "thanks" is naturally followed by the word "giving." Because we are grateful, we want to give, and what can we give the Man who has everything? Only ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto Him. So we can make our way of life one called "thanksgiving," in which in all things we give thanks to God for His care, His support, and His bountiful love. Thanksgiving will almost always lead us to give to others of our abundance, because we find that is the best way we can give to God. He does not need our money, our food, or our service for Himself, but He can use these things in answering the prayers of others. If you have realized how often God has answered your prayers by using other people as His agents, you will

realize, through your own thanksgiving, that you are called to be an agent, too. Thus there is a type of prayer called oblation, or offering, in which we make ourselves available to God, to be changed, to be put to work in His service, or both.

Both praise and thanksgiving help us to relate to God; one, by remembering how great God is, and the other by remembering how generous He has been to us, and to those whom we love. These are relational prayers of great importance, and they should be kept clearly separate in our minds, but can stand side by side in our prayer time.

Doing the Word, Individually: Ask God to show you a new and more meaningful way of praising Him than you have ever experienced before.

Doing the Word as a Group: Discuss the variety of ways you practice praise and thanksgiving. Have a service of adoration.

CHAPTER 5

CONFESSION

Let's talk a little about confession and self-examination. This is not a morbid kind of prayer, although it can be. Christianity is a religion that faces the matter of sin squarely and deals with it. Confession is our part, the facing of the matter squarely. When we have done this, then God can deal with sin through the merits of our blessed Lord. One of our continuing problems is that we like to fool ourselves about where we are in life. We try to appear richer, taller, more beautiful or handsome, stronger, smarter: in everything we try to fool others and ourselves.

There is no point in fooling around about sin. Progress is part of our life in the Spirit, but progress is impossible unless we are honest in our appraisal of where we are, and dissatisfied with what we find. You may remember the old story of the farmer who is trying to give a stranger directions and finally gives up and tells him, "You'll have to start from somewhere else, you just can't get there from here." In your spiritual life, you can't start from anywhere but from where you really are. Pretense robs you of any starting point at all.

Sin is failing to measure up to the potential that God gave you. Sin is putting self-will in place of the known will of God, either by commission or omission. Thus sin separates us from the God whose place we have preempted by putting ourselves in charge of our lives.

As sin separates us, so sin damages us. It erodes our purity, dulls our spiritual sense, and we can grow hopeless under the weight of missed opportunities. Self-examination locates the sin; confession describes it for what it is, an offense against God. Then God's cleansing and healing love can make us whole once more and set our feet on His path to continue on our journey.

When Marjorie and I first moved to Miami, we were entranced by the beautiful waters of Biscayne Bay and the Florida Keys. We just knew we had to have a yacht. You may have heard the definition that

says, “A yacht is a hole in the water, lined with wood or fiberglass, into which you pour money.” On a clergyman’s salary some stratagems were indicated if we were to be “yachtsmen.” I remember one that we bought, a 34-foot, twin engine cabin cruiser. Sounds very grand, and perhaps once she had been. We found this old “Higgins” ashore with a new bottom made of exterior plywood from old highway signs. Her engines were lying in the grass nearby, and someone had stolen the shafts and props. We got her together and afloat, and then we joined a very exclusive club at a nearby marina in the Miami River.

The club consisted of other owners of old boats which were tied to the docks with very strong lines. Each weekend we met and worked on our boats. We never went anywhere, we just worked on our boats. Sometimes we would stop to rest, and drink some coffee and swap lies about how someday we were going to Bimini or Abaco. But no one ever went anywhere at all. The more fortunate of us started up our engines occasionally to dream for a few minutes on the flying bridge about putting to sea as the exhausts muttered down below. But the boats were old and rotten. As soon as you’d fix the stern, the bow would fall off. We learned one great lesson. There’s no use painting over rotten wood! You’ve got to dig down, no matter how painful it is, to rip away great parts of your boat; you’ve got to get down to good wood. Hidden rot has to be brought to light before repairs can start.

So it is in our spiritual lives. All of us have hidden rot pushed down deep, and self-examination is designed to help us locate it, so that it can be confessed and repaired. There are various kinds of self-examination. Many church services begin with some kind of such examination and a confession. In the Episcopal Communion services, a penitential section is offered which combines such things as Scripture, sermon, creed, and perhaps the Ten Commandments as a standard by which to examine ourselves. In your private devotions you can use the seven deadly sins and the seven cardinal virtues as a basis for self-examination. Many good devotional books are available with these and other classic lists to help. Galatians 5 lists the “fruit of the Spirit,” nine characteristics which should be showing up in your life. This chapter also lists “lusts”...have you checked your lust list lately?

You may have your own notes of those things of which your conscience especially accuses you, and upon which you are trying to work, with the help of God.

In any event, having located our sins, those things which are contrary to God's known will for your life, you consider them until you are remorseful. Remorse, or sorrow for sin, should be a natural consequence of any prayerful consideration of the holiness and goodness of God, and your own sinful nature. Remorse is not penitence. Repentance involves a decision to change, to turn from the old life to a new one. That is what comes next: a time of decision made prayerfully, in the presence of God.

Confess your sins explicitly, not excusingly, looking them full in the face. In this connection it is sometimes helpful to make your confession in the presence of another human being. Of course, Catholic Christians believe that God has given power to His ministers to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins. This kind of formal confession with a priest also has the advantage of a visit to your spiritual "doctor," in that the priest can give advice and help as well as assigning a penance before pronouncing absolution. There is another factor here that is quite important, and that is the way you confess to God when you know another human being is listening. Somehow all the excuses and the vagueness disappear, and you "tell it like it is." If you want to make definite and specific spiritual progress, your confession needs to be definite and specific. Your local minister can advise you on how he handles this in your congregation.

A well-known Baptist leader said that Baptists need to recover the practice of confession in the presence of another person. He hastened to add that he was not advocating a Baptist priesthood. One might go to his pastor, or elder, or trusted friend, or even to his spouse (depending on what was to be confessed); the point is that when we are alone we often get quite vague in our confessions, and certainly dwell on the provocation to which we succumbed. Not so with another person listening.

Having faced up to our sin squarely, and laid the entire matter before God, we need then to intend restitution if that is possible. This can be a measure of our penitence, our willingness to make up for our act. Sometimes here we find we must suffer the greater pain of *not* making restitution because we would thereby cause even more damage to someone whom we have injured. This has to be considered quite unselfishly. We have hurt someone, we are sorry, we want to go to them and apologize, but perhaps to re-open the matter, or even to identify ourselves as the culprit, would do more damage. This could be an excuse to avoid restitution, but heavy-handed efforts to “make it up somehow” sometimes compound the damage.

Another element of confession is to purpose amendment, to resolve to go and sin no more. Although intellectually, academically, we know that we are sinners, and that we will certainly sin again, when confessing a specific sin, we must make up our minds, and intend with every fiber of our being, not to commit that sin again. To do less is to be less than completely penitent. Who knows, with God’s help, maybe you’ll lick that particular nemesis.

God’s forgiveness is a gift, and we must remember this even as we do the things that make up our part of the confession-forgiveness process. Receiving forgiveness depends upon confession, penitence, etc. Being forgiven depends entirely on the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ. God does forgive, and when He forgives, it is as if it had never happened.

Many people have a picture of God as a white-bearded celestial bookkeeper with a big book and a quill pen. In this mental picture each of us has two pages in the book. Many of us think of God as using double entry bookkeeping, one page for good deeds and one page for sins. At our physical death, He draws a line on each page, adds up the deeds and the sins, compares them, and then hands out a one-way ticket either to heaven or hell. Sounds pretty primitive, doesn’t it? Yet listen to otherwise intelligent people talk and you’ll hear that picture being described time and time again.

God is a loving heavenly Father, not a bookkeeper. If He were a bookkeeper, I think He would use the single-entry system. Just one

page for both profit and loss, credits and debits. The only thing is, when a sin is confessed and forgiven, He uses ink eradicator and it disappears from the ledger. The ink eradicator, of course, is the blood of God's Son, Jesus.

This should be the end of it, but unfortunately, too often it is not. There are people who confess their sins, ask God's forgiveness, believe that He has forgiven them, but refuse to forgive themselves because the sin was so black. This suggests that their standards are higher than God's standards, a blasphemy if there ever was one. It also makes it impossible for them to obey Christ's commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" because they are not loving themselves. Certainly a sin becomes unforgivable if you refuse to receive God's forgiveness, or hang on to a sin after it has been taken care of. The way out of this trap is to look long and hard at Jesus. He knows you in a way that you don't even want to know yourself. He loves you so much that while you were yet a sinner he died for you. If he who is perfect purity can love you, surely you can love yourself, and thus be freed to love others. Think about it.

Finally, it is part of God's plan for us to confess our sins. Without confession, we are in trouble. With confession, God can heal and bless. Hence these words from Psalm 32:

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

*I acknowledged my sin to thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord;"*

then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

Doing the Word, Individually: Take the time for serious self-examination, penitence, confession, restitution (if appropriate) and accepting God's forgiveness.

Doing the Word in a Group: Prepare and have a service of corporate confession in which you seek God's forgiveness for those things that are wrong in the world (whether or not each individual in the group feels personally responsible for each of the wrongs confessed)—seldom do we feel we have done everything we could have done to prevent them.

CHAPTER 6

ASKING PRAYER

“Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and, that they may obtain their petitions, make them to ask such things as shall please thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen” (1928 Book of Common Prayer, p. 203)

At first glance, the above prayer sounds like one of those religious exercises in which only God can win. Put another way, the prayer seems to be saying, “Help me to pray for what you were going to give me anyway, O Lord, so that when I get it, You’ll look good.” Of course, it doesn’t mean any such thing, but it is one of those deceptively simple prayers whose deep meaning can easily escape us. What I hear this prayer saying to me as I pray is that we ought always to seek God’s will for our lives before asking anything. If His will for us is perfection, as we believe, then we ought not to have anything that is contrary to that will. If His love for us is perfect love, as we believe, then He is not likely to give us anything that is less than helpful to us.

The subject of learning God’s will, of distinguishing His designs for us from our own, is covered in the next chapter. Bearing in mind that you go to prayer neither to inform God of that which He cannot otherwise know nor to change His mind to that which He had not intended to do, it becomes rather apparent that petition is a matter of putting yourself in the way of doing what God intended. If we seem to labor this point in this book, it is because petition is so commonly thought of as exactly the opposite. We mustn’t let the familiar image of God as our heavenly “Father” mislead us into thinking that He’s exactly like our earthly father. Here comes dear old Dad home from work, and we meet him with the news of the day that he would not otherwise know, and then besiege the poor man with our requests which he might not otherwise be disposed to grant.

My heavenly Father loves me in a way at which my earthly mind can only guess. He wants for me a life that is beyond my wildest dreams, He wills to give me “better things than I can desire or pray for.” If this is so, then the root meaning of my petitions is always, “Lord, I place myself in your perfect will. In this present need of which I am aware, I trust you to reveal to me how I am to comport myself in order to become in and through it, what you have created me to be.”

If my body is malfunctioning, God knows it, and He is able to put it right. I do not come to Him to tell Him that I am sick, or to tell Him what to do about it. Rather, I bring to Him my own concern over this sickness and place myself under His tender, loving care to be healed. He may heal me directly, and to my small mind, miraculously. He may direct me to the right doctor, or medicine, or exercise, or diet, or whatever. It is comforting to me, humanly speaking, to “tell” God my problems, but that mustn’t blind me to the fact that He already knew about them and had the answers ready whenever I got around to applying to Him for them.

I am convinced that God always wants us to turn to Him for guidance in knowing and carrying out His will for our lives. It is obvious to me that the road to “successful” prayer (which for most people means getting what you asked for) is to ask God for those things which He wants us to have. If I want help in doing injury to my neighbor, then I had better ask someone other than the God of love and peace. If I want help in forgiving my enemy, then I can expect lots of it from the Father of One who forgave his enemies, even on the cross. As I read the Psalms of David, I think David had not yet learned this, but it should be plain to Christians. We say that God always answers prayer; the answer may be *yes*, *no*, or *later*, but never “maybe.” God is always definite. “Yes” means, “I see that you are ready to receive that which will put you back in the center of my will.” “No” means, “You have asked for the wrong thing.” “Later” means, “There is that in your life which makes immediate realizations of your desire impossible. As soon as you change, or someone else changes, my will for you can be realized. In the meantime, seek my present will for you

in the situation as it is.” The latter is so important, because often we seek the ideal, when for the time being we have to seek the possible.

I can't discuss “petition” in these days without talking about praying for big things and little things. My observation is that you can tell something about the spiritual progress of another person by the things he, or she, prays about. Many of us have a mediocre God from whom we don't wish to ask anything unless we are sure that Someone, with just a little more power than we have, could give it. The next step is to begin to ask for really big things. To pray with conviction, for example, for people with cancer or coronaries. At this stage we refuse to consider anyone a “terminal” patient. We assume that God wants healing, and that He will provide it, right up to the moment when He calls the patient home. As our friend, Virginia Lively, put it, “Of course you have to die, but you don't have to die *sick*.” A bigger vision of God's power is a sign of spiritual progress.

The step that I think goes even beyond faith in God's ability to deal with problems of massive proportions, is the step that takes you into faith in God's desire to deal with minutiae. Praying for parking places absolutely blows the minds of some people. “How can you presume,” they ask, “to bother God with tiny and self-centered details like that?” I have lots of reasons...the first is that my heavenly Father is interested in anything that is of concern to me, just as an earthly father is interested in the tiniest bump that his precious child suffers. Secondly, my God is not at all limited by the numbers or sizes of the requests made of Him. He can handle it OK, not to worry. Third, there is nothing whose successful conclusion would cause me to say “thank God” which I ought not to have taken to God in the first place. If I am going to call on a parishioner in a huge hospital, and my time is limited, and if the vast parking lot is jammed, I whisper a prayer for assistance and start looking for places near the door, rather than three blocks away. Time and time again, someone starts his or her car and leaves just as I get there. Now I wonder what prompted them to do that? I breathe a prayer of thanks.

I notice, too, that people tend to limit God's ability to that which they can comprehend. This means that they don't expect

miracles, for a miracle is nothing but something that goes beyond our understanding. What goes on inside our television set is in that category for most of us; it is just miraculous what the science of electronics has done. People refuse to pray about something because, they say, they don't see what God could do about it. It is exactly at such points of inadequacy that our Father wants us to pray, then things begin to happen. Maybe we understand what happened; maybe we say, "It's a miracle!" In all things, with prayer and supplication, we are to make our requests known unto God. Rufus Womble, past Warden of the Order of St. Luke (a healing ministry), says, "If you bring a small vessel, God will fill it. If you bring a large vessel, God will fill that, too."

Intercession

If petition is the most common form of prayer, intercession, or praying for others, is the second most common form. Intercession is a form of petition. To petition is to ask; to intercede is to ask on behalf of another. Just as we make our needs known to God in all things, so we lift up our concern about the needs of others to Him also.

In order to keep our prayers from being a matter of giving God His orders for the day, let's think a little bit about what seems to happen when we pray. We've mentioned Lewis McLachlin and his reminder that we do not intend to change the perfect mind of God as we pray. Let us remember that our goal in prayer is to make our needs known, to get them out in the open, to think about them before God, and to clarify by expression those things which weigh upon our hearts. Of course, God already knows our needs. The purpose of prayer is neither to inform Him nor to change Him. It is well said that prayer doesn't change God, it changes people.

Haven't you noticed how often our prayers are answered either affirmatively or negatively through the acts of other people? God does indeed use people to answer prayer. It behooves us always to remember that we are people, too, and that while we are hoping God will use someone to meet our expressed needs, He may well be calling upon us to be His instruments to meet the needs of someone else. We can't all

be pray-ers and not do-ers. Supremely is this true in the matter of intercession. Don't pray about the needs of another unless you are willing to be part of the answer to your own prayer.

Years ago, department stores did not have cash registers in every department. When you made a purchase, the clerk would fill out a sales slip, put it and your money in a little cylindrical container, attach this to a conveyor device, and whoosh...the whole thing went zooming up to the balcony where change was made. Then the container returned via the same route. I believe most of us have visualized our prayers for others as zooming up to heaven, and then thought of God as sending the answer zooming down another line to our needy friend, wherever he might be.

Let's consider the possibility that the route is otherwise. Suppose God already knows the need and is looking for a vehicle through which He can meet it. You go to prayer for that need, and thereby an avenue is opened. Now your prayer is simply an announcement to God that you are open as an intercessor for someone, and God's help comes flooding through you and across to the other.

This picture has several positive values in helping us to understand what goes on in intercessory prayer. The first one is obviously that we are not bending God to our will in the matter at hand. It also helps us to understand that there is no such thing as "ganging up on God," getting so many people to pray, that God is simply forced to do what we want. That is very poor theology. It also helps us to realize how important it is that we do pray, how important the work of intercession is. If we are truly involved in what we are doing, then intercession does indeed become work, a pious and holy work that puts us on God's team, right where He has wanted us all along. It is moreover, a work that can be done by a person who can do absolutely nothing else. You could be in an iron lung, paralyzed and mute, dependent on others for every bodily function, and still be a powerful intercessor, a great worker for God. One begins to see that the contemplative, the cloistered, have not copped out on the work of the world, but have secluded themselves in order to work even harder

at a task of gigantic importance, being vehicles for God's grace in a needy, needy world.

Another facet of this understanding is the importance of being a Christian athlete, of so training and disciplining your prayer life, indeed your entire life, that you suffer nothing to clog the means through which God will do His healing, strengthening, comforting work. So many of the impediments to prayer that we discuss in this book apply with great force right here. Imagine that you are *the* vehicle through which God wishes to heal someone. Would you dare to let anything block that way?

Sometimes, of course, the work of intercessory prayer involves our physical presence at the place of need. We may go and lay hands on the sick in the name of Jesus and have the joy of seeing them recover. Despite the assurance and satisfaction we may get from seeing God use us both physically and spiritually, that is not usually necessary in order to fulfill God's purposes. God can heal without us going to the person who needs healing. Witness the story of the Centurion's Servant in Matthew 8. "Speak the word only and my servant shall be healed." God is in no wise limited by geography.

What I do believe this understanding of the nature of intercession to involve is the need for wholehearted concentration of our faculties on the matter. I remember when my brother Jim had a massive coronary some years ago. At that moment I couldn't go to him, but I could pray. Boy, did I pray! I spoke with God about the need for Jim's healing, for his mental attitude, for those who loved him to be comforted, for the doctors, nurses, and technicians to be inspired and guided. I went into great detail about the whole situation at least once a day, as best I could picture what was going on there, a thousand miles away. Then the rest of the day, and whenever I would awaken in the night, I would pray fervently again, but these times it was not a detailed prayer. Just an intense, "Thank you, God, for your healing love, at work within Jim." This was not to remind God, but to keep me open as an avenue for that healing love, in ways that went beyond my comprehension. In those first days I prayed dozens of times, maybe hundreds. I made my best effort to be an intercessor for Jim. I'm happy

to report that Jim, although he had a cardiac arrest at one point, did make it, and lived several more content and happy years. As a bonus, Jim had a beautiful vision of Jesus during his illness which he could recall vividly every day as he prayed.

This raises another important point about being an intercessor. For how many people can I be an intercessor? How many desperate needs could I be a vehicle for at one time? God is not limited, but I am. Could I pray for two at once, or three, or four? What are the outside limits of my capacity as an intercessor? I remember at one church which we served, we used to have a Ministry of Prayer which involved a weekly prayer list of more than 100 names. We held up this list and asked God to bless and meet every need on it. Okay, I'm not putting down prayer lists, there are thousands of them around right this minute. Nor would I limit God's ability to size up that whole list at a glance and act upon the information received. But I suspect that He needs us as vehicles of His loving concern more than He needs a list to acquaint Him with all the problems in the world; so I suggest that we give new thought to our role in intercession.

Actually, when someone casually asks me to pray for so and so, I really ought to say, "No, I won't," but they'd never understand. Even if I tried to explain, "No, I'm full up just now, I've got all I can conscientiously pray for at the moment." They'd still say, "Oh, just add this name to your list." These days, when my own prayer list gets long, I take it in sections in order to concentrate. We ought always to shun glibness in prayer in favor of focused faculties, in intercession perhaps more than anywhere else.

From time to time as you pray for others, ask yourself why you are doing this. No one calls Jesus "Lord" but by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. In like manner, if you are called to be an intercessor in a specific instance, it is God who called you. You didn't just happen to think, "Why don't I pray for Gene today?" Let's remember that God is the aggressor, and that the initiative is in His hands. We are responding to His prompting when we decide to set about a work of prayer.

Doing the Word, Individually: Prayerfully revise your intercessory prayer list, leaving on it only those people and situations which you currently believe God is prompting you to pray for.

Doing the Word in a Group: Discuss three, four or five situations you believe God is calling you—as a group—to pray for. Make a commitment to prayer for those situations; and, when next you meet, discuss the results of your prayers.

CHAPTER 7

MEDITATION, CONTEMPLATION, AND PRAYER LANGUAGE

Meditation is as old as Christianity. “Think on these things” speaks of meditation. Discursive thinking, to consider, to think about, to ruminate upon, all these are part of meditation. At the time this book is being written, other forms of meditation—including those from eastern religions and the New Age movement—are receiving so much publicity that we need to begin this chapter by saying what Christian meditation is not. Christian meditation does not require an altered state of consciousness, although one may occur. Christian meditation looks beyond man to God, although it may involve a consideration of knowledge of God already in man’s consciousness. Christian meditation is not an escape from reality, not a method of resting during a busy day. It may prove restful, and it can certainly transform our appreciation of reality. Christian meditation is, above all, a way to “be still and know.”

The writer saw an NBC television documentary which described how people achieve altered states of consciousness through various spiritual techniques. Most had to do with the spirit of man, and thus do not consider themselves particularly religious.

The program indicated that some five million Americans were involved in Transcendental Meditation, Sufi, Zen, Est, Mind Control, Yoga and other practices which seek to alter the human consciousness to bring peace and enlightenment. This is a profoundly significant activity in our country. It indicates a hunger for something that the Christian Church can, and should, provide, but which it rather obviously has not been offering. There is that about the human spirit which will cause us to seek out something which we need for greater fulfillment. If the church is not offering it, people will look elsewhere. The fact that five million Americans are venturing into the spiritual

world in the wrong way at least shows they are seeking the spiritual—something only Christianity can provide in the right way.

I was struck by the similarity of some of the things I saw on TV to things to which the Christian community has been returning in recent years. I saw singing, dancing, personal encounter, breathing exercises, small groups, incense, flowers, many items that are part and parcel of the Christian growth lifestyle. But my reading tells me that behind many of these things is an approach to God very different from the Christian one; a view of life very different from the one Jesus came to proclaim, a belief in the supernatural that is directly contrary to the Christian position. So I find it important for us to separate that which we can in good conscience follow from that which we must reject, even though it is seemingly helping the symptoms of the sickness of our age.

Christian meditation is basically an effort to receive what God is trying to give us. This may focus upon material containing something He has already said to others in order to extract the kernel of meaning for specific needs. Or it may be an attempt to open ourselves to His direct and personal guidance by concentrating on an event of Jesus' life, an event of our own lives, a situation, or an experience, in order that God may assign meaning to it and communicate that meaning to us. It is dangerous to generalize about the many non-Christian kinds of meditation now available. Insofar as they are non-religious, they are seeking answers within the depths of man, not from God. Those which are religious are seeking in their own way to bring the mind and heart of man into the presence of deity. If you maintain that there is, after all, only one God, study will still reveal that the Christian way is the unique approach to God, and that there are serious incompatibilities with other systems.

We meditate on things that are readily available to us. These givens of our world—Scripture, experiences, writings of holy people—all exist and are worthy of deeper consideration. We ask ourselves questions about each of these things. What does it mean? What does it mean to me? What will I do about it? Sometimes this meditation is simply thinking. Sometimes it takes the form of a quiet conversation with a friend, a kind of “thinking out loud.” Sometimes it can be done

by writing. Trying to write logically about something exposes viewpoints you didn't know you had, develops lines of thought you had not previously explored. This is one of the values of journal keeping.

The plus in Christian meditation, the thing that makes it religious, is that we never meditate alone. There is present with us that other Person, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God, however you want to describe him. Thus Christian meditation is not simply a matter of contemplating one's own navel in order to solve the problems of the world, but a method of exposing ourselves to the indwelling power and guidance of Almighty God, so that we may learn, grow and do.

How to meditate is easily worth a book of its own. Books are available on the subject. Basically what these books are saying are things common to all prayer. In order to communicate with God, we learn all we can about who He is, are open to learn all we can about who we are, work to establish our openness to Him, learn to get quiet before the Lord, and then act. There are five things here:

1. Learn about God.
2. Learn about ourself.
3. Be open, be willing, be teachable.
4. Get quiet, learn to listen.
5. Don't just read about it, begin!

To learn about God means to study the Christian faith, to read our Bible regularly, to become aware of what God has said on other occasions so that we will be conditioned to hear the kind of things He may say to us. This is also an important safeguard to help us recognize what is of God and what may be coming to us from another source. God is consistent; therefore we may expect what He does now to be consonant with what He has said and done in the past.

To learn about ourself is more important than most religious people realize. Just as we have to learn to love ourselves before we can love our neighbor, so we have to learn to know ourselves before we can truly appreciate what God is trying to tell us. In our spiritual lives we have always to begin from where we actually are. All the pretenses that

we may hold up before the world are handicaps to us in our spiritual growth. We have to face life as it really is, and ourselves as we really are. We have to be honest about our fears, our anxieties, our hopes, our lusts, our hungers, our ambitions, our striving.

Learning about God and about oneself is not good unless we are open and teachable. This first requires hope; hope that life can be different from what it now is, that *we* can be different, better, growing, no matter how damaged or cast down. Secondly, being open requires us to put away all pride in our present situation. We must learn that often when we think things are just about as fine as they can get, humanly speaking, one or both of two things may happen. The first is that the bottom may drop out of everything and our wonderful situation turns to ashes in a day. The second is that God may have something far better in store for us, something so wonderful we will wonder how we were ever happy with what we had. Of course, He may bring the second state out of the first. Meditation is not employed to put a higher polish on our halo! God has that for us which can make the present pale into insignificance. When we meditate, we should be open to great things, grand ideas, sweeping movements in our life. Then we will hear the whisper.

Getting quiet before the Lord is a subject important enough to merit several pages in this book. Perhaps we can turn up the volume on the TV sufficiently to drown all other audible competition, but the voice of God frequently is a still small voice, or should seem so in the din and clamor of our ingrown lives. We have to learn to still this clamor, to be quiet, to put away things of self, to muffle all interfering elements which compete for our attention, and center down on God and His message for us. Basic, but often overlooked.

The last of the five is to *begin!* How trite, how simple, and how often overlooked. We can read about meditation all our life and never really meditate. We can take what we know right now and have a very fruitful time of meditation. Let's not forget that God is the aggressor, that we are not seeking Him—we are responding to His seeking. He's waiting, get to it!

The purpose of meditation is to hear what God is saying. The *object* of our meditation is the subject we are centering down on. A common practice is to select a scripture passage and consider it prayerfully, asking God to help us understand. An approach to this employs four steps. First, we live into the scene, and identify with a character. We find the good news of the Gospel in that scene for us right now, and finally we give the story a name.

Let's illustrate that with the story of the woman taken in adultery. Try to picture yourself standing there watching Jesus and his disciples when the woman comes running onto the scene. In your mind's eye visualize the place, the buildings, the street, the people. Try to imagine sounds and smells, feel the wind. Now comes the woman and her pursuers. You watch the familiar story unfold, only this time you try to be one of the characters. Who will you be? The woman, Jesus, or one of the angry crowd? Now Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you; go in peace and sin no more." What is there in your life right now that cries out for that bit of good news? As you discover the Bible message for you, now, specifically, give the experience a name. Perhaps you might call it "The Rock Pile," for all the stones you've wanted to cast and have never qualified to throw.

There are many ways to meditate on Scripture. We can learn about this as a collateral study as we learn to study the Bible. We can concentrate on events, or trends, or subjects, etc. We might meditate on some quality of Jesus, his compassion, or tenderness, or wisdom, or attitude toward evil, etc. Move from the Bible and meditate on an event in history from God's viewpoint, or on a great person, or on the problems of a country. Take a religious book and pause from time to time in your reading to ask yourself, "What is God saying to me here?"

Meditating on our own situation requires that we first get very much in tune with God; otherwise we will not be in prayer, but in worry, or human scheming, or simply day dreaming. Once we have become still, and are beginning to know God and His viewpoint, then we let our mind turn to things of present concern to us—to see them as He sees them. He can speak clearly and profoundly in this way. Be sure we start with Him, and not with our problems.

With practice, and over a period of time, some people are able to pick up God's viewpoint more quickly. They learn to center down more rapidly, to be still and know, even in the midst of a fast-paced situation. Just a short time to recollect the presence of God, to get quiet within and hear what He is saying, then their view of a current situation can move toward His view, not just in one's set apart prayer time, but in the heat and bustle of the day.

Contemplation

Most of us spend very little time in contemplation, yet here is the root meaning of "be still and know." To meditate means to consider, to think about, to form images as God guides, etc. To contemplate means simply to look at, to be aware of, just be with. Contemplation of the divine goes beyond words, even beyond images. It is not a prayer state that is reached quickly by the novice. It is also one that many sincere Christians see little point in. When they are with God they want to be doing, talking, thinking, learning, growing.

One can learn from contemplation, certainly one can grow, but that is not its purpose. The contemplative life with God is simply to *be*, to be with God, to adore Him silently, beyond words, in that closeness of which the companionable silence of earthly lovers is merely a pale shadow.

We do not achieve the contemplative state by our own spiritual ability or powers. As we get quiet before the Lord, perhaps after we have spoken to Him about the things that concern us most, perhaps even after a fruitful time of meditation upon some spiritual subject, then if we seek simply to be before Him, to be still and know—nothing—except that we are in God's presence, then He will take care of the words running through our mind; He will erase the images. With His help we can be at peace and at one with Him. Gone is the need to accomplish, to think, to learn, to be better. Now we are content simply to be, to rest in His presence, to let all the striving, all the growing, all the many things of our spirituality just wait there below while we ascend the mountain with Him. We shouldn't be surprised if

someone coming upon us in this state finds us transfigured. Was this not what happened to Jesus and to Moses? It can happen to us—someday, somewhere.

Prayer Language

We need to deal now with one of the more controversial gifts of the Spirit, speaking in tongues. Actually, I want to get very clear from the beginning that there are three kinds of this speaking, two of which are not very common outside of Pentecostal groups. And what happened in Acts 2 is a fourth type. Let's get all of these straight and then we can proceed to examine the one type which is of special interest in a book on prayer.

In the book of Acts, Jesus promises his disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and that they will be witnesses unto him (Acts 1:8). In Acts 2 we have the famous Pentecost scene where the disciples were all with one accord in one place, and the Spirit did come. There was a sound as of a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire seemed to play around their heads and they did indeed witness. They not only proclaimed the wonderful works of God but they were able to do it in such a way that people from many different language backgrounds were able to understand them. Whether the disciples spoke Cretan, Cappadocian, Cyrenaic, etc., or whether the visitors were supernaturally enabled to understand the disciples' Hebrew and Aramaic, is not clear. But their interest was so stimulated by God speaking through the disciples that after a sermon by Peter, 3,000 were baptized and added to the Church.

That was special. We do not read of that kind of event happening again in the New Testament. But we do hear about "speaking in tongues," apparently unknown tongues, not known languages as on the day of Pentecost. This speaking was done in church, in a gathering of Christians, and it was addressed to the Christians, not to God. Since no one understood this unknown tongue, someone must be given the gift of interpretation. When interpreted, this message in tongues had the force of prophecy, a

message from God to His children, filtered through the speaker and the interpreter. Paul is concerned in 1 Corinthians 12:12 that there is too much of this going on in the church gatherings, and that there is spiritual pride among those who are involved. He counsels that only two or three bring such messages, that they do so one at a time, that they not do so at all unless someone is there who can interpret.

We can go to almost any Pentecostal church today and hear this phenomenon. After a time of worship, someone speaks aloud in an unknown language and then either that person or someone else interprets the message. This is prayer in the sense that it is communication with God, God being the source of the message. But we shall call this “speaking” in tongues since the audible part of it comes from a person’s mouth and is intended for the ears of others.

In the same Pentecostal church setting, there may be a time of prayer in which most of the people in the congregation will pray out loud, each his or her own prayers. Some of these people will pray audibly in an unknown tongue. But this is not a message from God to the congregation. These folks are talking to God and are being overheard because of their custom of praying out loud in church. I would distinguish this type by calling it “praying” in tongues since it is addressed to God and not to human ears.

This is the “prayer language” which has come to form an important part of the prayer tools of millions of Christians today. The vast majority of these people never use their language in public, nor are even overheard praying in this way. It is a matter of private devotion. In the Pentecostal bodies, the reception of a prayer language is closely, and even necessarily, connected with receiving the Holy Spirit or being “baptized” in the Holy Spirit. In these bodies, people are prayed for to receive the Holy Spirit and “evidence” of his arrival is usually audible and sought for. But after that initial experience, most such Christians exercise their prayer language privately, with the possible exception of praying audibly in church as noted above.

In denominations where people are not “prayed through” to the baptism in the Holy spirit, many received their prayer language in their private devotions and use it in the same setting. Some indeed call

it their “devotional” language. It is a quiet and very deep part of their spirituality. Such people probably form the majority of today’s “charismatics” and their somewhat different prayer life is not at all visible to their fellow churchmen, although its results may be.

Some find it difficult to express all that is upon their hearts in their native language. You may not. You may have such a fullness of expression, such a freedom of speech when you pray to God that you feel no need for anything further. This is fine; no one has to have a prayer language, just as no one has to speak in tongues. But it is a valuable gift and one that has been an integral part of my personal prayer life for many years. It is a gift which I firmly believe can be employed by any yielded Christian who so desires. Therefore no special merit attaches to being able to manifest this gift. It is a tool God gives if you need it. The self-righteousness sometimes associated with “speaking in tongues” need hardly apply here. This is a part of your private devotional life, it is between you and God, and is nobody else’s business. It is not anything that I brag about, I simply mention that I have this gift in order to be helpful in explaining this subject.

I was open to a prayer language because of my own insufficiencies in the area of praise. In seeking to praise God I used all of the set prayers that I knew, and I used all the prayers that I knew to make up in English, and then I asked God to help me still further. I found that I was lifting up my heart, my mind, my very soul to God in words and phrases that had no meaning to me, but which I felt very much assured had meaning for Him. It was as if my subconscious mind was now able to pray to God in a way that my conscious mind had done when I had used words which I understood. So a whole vast area of my personality found expression in prayer in a way that perhaps it had not before.

In the years since then I have, many times, needed to pray on subjects about which I knew not how to pray, so I have prayed in this way as God gave me guidance. I have needed to reach into my life in a way that I have not been able to do consciously. God has helped with this. I find when I am troubled, and praying in English brings no apparent ease of heart and mind, that praying for a little while in my

prayer language often results in that peace of God which passes understanding. But there it is, and my experience and that of literally millions of Christians, testify to the value of a prayer language in personal devotions.

If you as a praying Christian desire to have this gift added to your storehouse of prayer abilities, the procedure is relatively simple. I do not believe that you have to have someone else lay hands on you and pray. I don't believe there has to be a great deal of emotion involved. Just be sure that you are yielding your life, as best you know how to do, to the Lord Jesus. Make your motives in seeking this gift as pure as you know how to make them, so that you are not seeking to add one more "spiritual merit badge" to your sash, but that you truly wish to be able to pray in a fuller way, to praise God in an additional way. Then ask Him to help you with this. After you have praised Him in English, just lift up your heart and mind, the very depths of your being, with all your fervor, and offer to God whatever words and syllables you might produce.

I sometimes suggest to folks that they concentrate on a picture of Jesus and fill their conscious mind completely with this vision. It can be a familiar painting or a stained-glass window—anything. Fill your mind so full of him that you pay no attention to the words you speak, and then take a deep breath and begin to make random sounds. If your conscious mind is focused on him, the sounds are not likely to continue to be random for very long. Soon you will find that as you have this experience, as it continues to be a prayerful experience, that the sounds you are making are coming from some other Source. These sounds will be like words, you will note the intonation to include sentences and paragraphs. There seems to be meaning. Tapes of this kind of speech have been taken to language labs, and while they usually are not in any known language, linguistic experts frequently say, "We don't know what this is, but it is obviously a language."

If you are going to try I recommend that you do it when you have rather complete privacy so that there is no question of embarrassment, so that you may be perfectly free. Experience indicates

that perhaps the first time you do this you need to have a fair amount of volume, speaking out in at least a normal conversational tone.

After this means of communication with God has been opened for you, you may find yourself bubbling over in tongues in moments of particular exaltation in prayer, in high spiritual moments. You will certainly find that you do have an ability to speak to the Father in situations where formerly you were hindered by your own prayer limitations. Yet the gift is always controllable, you can start or stop at will. It is not ecstatic speech, in that you are not “out of it” in any uncontrolled way. Thank God for each gift that enables us better to praise Him.

Sometimes in a gathering where many have the gift of tongues, a phenomenon known as “singing in tongues” or “singing in the Spirit” occurs. Singing in the Spirit is always spontaneous and cannot be programmed. An alert leader can foster the experience but not create it. Such singing usually begins as a group finishes singing some other song. A tone lingers on and then there is another tone, then perhaps a little melody from someone, either in English or in a prayer language. Soon the entire group is involved in a deeply prayerful and worshipful experience. The volume is not great but the sound is beautiful, unearthly and unforgettable. Each person participating is singing whatever note or melody or words God is giving him. And when the inspiration is withdrawn, the experience is over and the whole group stops as if on cue.

Doing the Word, Individually: Put into practice in your own spiritual life one of the methods of prayer described in this chapter.

Doing the Word in a Group: Have members of the group discuss—as a result of reading other material on the subject and/or from their own personal experience—the three types of prayer recommended in the chapter.

The Very Rev. Robert B. Hall was the founder and executive director of the Episcopal Center for Evangelism, during which time he and his wife Marjorie travelled extensively in the United States and overseas teaching evangelism and prayer. Bob served as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Oklahoma City before retiring to Live Oak, Florida. Marjorie attended Mary Washington College, is a graduate of the Institute of Children's Literature, and enjoys writing and painting.