

**Prayer:
Responding to God
Book 2**

by Robert B. and Marjorie W. Hall

A COMPASSbook from BIBLE READING FELLOWSHIP

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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 dealt 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

WAYS OF HEARING GOD SPEAK

If we are talking to someone infinitely wiser than ourself, the smart thing to do is to spend most of the time listening. Yet most of us who talk to God spend most of the time speaking to God instead of listening to Him. Using the illustration of a “ham” radio, we have two pieces of equipment, a receiver and a transmitter. And no one is supposed to put his transmitter on the air until he has listened carefully with the receiver to see that the band is clear.

Some of us go into our prayer closets, turn our spiritual transmitters to high power and blast away at God, then shut down the whole rig and walk away without ever turning on our receivers at all. We ask for guidance, for direction, for empowerment and then stop the whole prayer business. I have a mental picture of God with His mouth open, left without anyone to listen to the wonderful things He has to share.

Aside from our own egos which would make God one of our servants, a sort of convenient genie that prayer lets out of the bottle, the most common cause for not listening to God must be that we are not really familiar with the ways in which He speaks to us. We do not in fact know how to listen to God. If we are to “be still and know,” we need instruction in how to know as well as in how to be still.

God speaks to us in two general categories: sensory and non-sensory. Under sensory input, God speaks to us through our eyes. We see events, contemplate nature, read the Bible and Christian writers, and God’s message can come through. He speaks to us through our ears as we hear sermons, testimonies and teachings, from sources open to His prompting. I don’t know about the other three senses, but I do believe that God’s hand can be felt in the loving and serving touch of a dedicated child of His.

Much of what God has to say to us does not come into our consciousness through our sense organs. For example, God gives us ideas. This can either be in the form of new facts, such as would

constitute the gift of knowledge, or as an understanding of facts already in our possession, as in the gift of wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:8). It is a good idea to keep pencil and paper handy during our prayer times. Instead of being apologetic if our mind wanders as we come into tune with God, we can make a note of the thoughts which come, and test them to see if they come from God. In church, there are times in which we have good opportunity to let our mind wander over many aspects of our life while we are in the nearer presence of God. This is not the wandering of mind associated with coldness of heart, but with the guidance of God. The same thing may well happen when we are reading our Bible. In addition to the information coming to us through our eyes, while He has our attention God may speak to us of something quite different.

Input from God that comes in this way needs to be tested, just as prophecy would, and for the same reason. Since no one else can hear or see our idea, we need some external standard by which to check it to avoid being led astray by our own desires, or by the prompting of Satan. However, the idea already has a lot going for it if it came when we were deliberately seeking God's presence and guidance. If it also passes the tests of being loving and not contrary to God's otherwise revealed will, then we can go on to develop the idea further under the sought assistance of God.

God also guides us through our emotions, the way we feel about things. After prayerful consultation, God colors our attitudes and thus motivates us. This is very shaky ground, taken by itself, but in combination with other guidance it is useful.

Marjorie and I have made a number of major life decisions using the three-fold guidance system advocated by Bob Mumford in his book *Take Another Look at Guidance*. Mumford speaks of three beacon lights of guidance that are essential if you are to let God guide you into safe harbor. The first is the direct guidance you might get in any of the ways we list in this chapter. The second is the lore and heritage of the faith, what you know already about the revealed will of God, especially as enshrined in the Bible. The third is the witness of your own spirit, how you feel about the proposed course of action after prayer.

The way we feel about something can be a very important form of guidance if Christ is within us. It can lead to a very self-centered life if He is not. Christian experience does show that one of the ways that God speaks to us, one of His methods of guidance, involves our feelings, emotions, and attitudes. In the total picture of guidance we use our minds, we study God's previous decisions in the area of concern, but since our feelings and attitudes are part of the whole person, we must expect Him to deal with us in this realm also.

Since feelings, hungers and wants are closely allied with our animal natures, we must always be alert to the possibility that it is this part of ourselves which is trying to guide us. Everyone is familiar with the child who says, "I *need* this," when what he means is, "I *want* this." It is always good to go slow about attributing anything that comes to us to Almighty God, and nowhere is caution more important than in the matter of feelings. Yet this can be an important way in which He speaks. Let's illustrate:

Suppose it seems to me that God is calling me to go and be a missionary in Alaska. Well, the Bible says, "Go ye into all the world." The Church needs missionaries in Alaska, intellectually everything seems to be in line with what can be known about God's will. But as I am in prayer about this step, I find that I don't want to go to Alaska. Very much I don't want to go. It is not just because I've been up there a couple of times and have seen the snow, and felt the cold, and been awed by the vastness. It's just that I don't *feel* called to go. Careful now! Continue to pray. If it is God's will for me; if He is telling me He wants me to go, then gradually I'll have peace about this guidance...and I'll go. I may freeze to death, but I'll do it serenely.

Anytime we believe with our mind that we are following God's will, but we continue to feel uneasy about it, it is time to slow down. We need to be much in prayer and move very carefully, for if our whole life is yielded to Him, we may expect Him to communicate with the whole person, body, mind and feelings.

In considering prayer and emotion, let's remember the difference between joy and happiness. The latter is a reflection of externals. When things are going well we can say, "Man, now we're living!" When things are going badly for us, we may be downcast. But

our *joy* soon can take away from us, because joy comes from the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Jesus. Only we can push him out. This joy is irrepressible, bubbling up and overflowing even in the midst of a truly hectic day.

I remember directing a conference in a New York hotel. We had nearly a thousand people there, and everything went wrong that could go wrong. We had made up our minds in advance that we would just “count it all joy.” Whenever catastrophe occurred, we just made light of it, counting to ten on our fingers, “counting it all joy” so to speak, until the indwelling presence of God straightened out our human feeling of frustration, anxiety, fear and anger. God speaks to the human spirit by what He does as well as by what He says. We were there in New York to run a great Christian conference. We were there because our intelligence had told us over a period of years that we ought to be there. Now we let God take care of our feelings, and He surely did. It has been well said that sometimes the Lord calms the storm. More often He lets the storm rage, and calms His child.

A very common experience in spiritual renewal is the effort of a newly renewed, or revived, Christian to try to hold on to, or recapture the near ecstasy of the moment of renewal. What a thrill it can be to find oneself in the nearer presence of God, especially if we have been away a long time. Christians are not called upon to be thrill-seekers. Some of us need to grow up. We go around from speaker to speaker with fingers outstretched, seeking to pick the frosting off the cake, when what God has ready for us now is meat and potatoes to strengthen us for hard work in His service. Getting in the will of God may give us a thrill, but seeking thrills is not the same thing as seeking the will of God.

How we feel about something may be God speaking to us. I say “may” because there are two important cautions. The first is that the feeling must agree with our other, more objective forms of guidance. The second is that our feeling must follow upon a prayerful consideration of the subject. Then there is the possibility that it is *God’s* feeling.

It has also been pointed out by experienced travelers on Christ’s way that sometimes the answer does not come until we begin to move.

Sitting still will not always bring the guidance we need. We pray, we listen and then we use our best judgment. As we begin to move, God's guidance becomes apparent. This can be likened to the rudder on a ship, which is just a mass of useless metal until the vessel gets under way. One doesn't want to get ahead of God, but on the other hand, circumstances sometimes demand some kind of action. Pray and listen, then move and trust.

If prayer is two-way communication with God, then perhaps God's part of it should get a lot more attention than our part of it. Unless we are trapped in the childish attitude of prayer that never gets beyond our asking and God's giving, then we should be listening to what God has to say to us, not just when we have specifically asked for guidance, but daily and hourly as we report for duty.

In preaching missions, I often said, "God has a plan for your life. It is an original plan, tailored specifically for your life and for no one else. It is uniquely suited to help you become what God created you to be. God has a plan for your life, and, if you will ask Him, He will reveal it to you." As I said these words, I could see by some of the skeptical looks that it had never really occurred to those in the audience that God would tell them anything specific at all.

God does speak; God does reveal Himself; God does tell us His will for our lives; God does get specific; God does enter space and time in our lives just as He did in the life of His Son Jesus. The way we meet Him, the way we hear what He has to say to us, may be called listening prayer. Here's how He does it.

Many centuries ago, one of the early church leaders divided prayer into four categories: *lectio, oratio, meditatio, and contemplatio*, which is to say, reading, speaking, meditating, and contemplating. Our friend of long ago had discovered what is just as true today, that God speaks to us as we read, as we speak to Him, as we meditate on what we know and as we look at what we see. God deals with us primarily through our mind and our emotions. He does this by the power of His blessed Spirit.

Someone said recently that God doesn't often speak words. This took me aback as I thought quickly about "the word of God," "God spake these words and said..." etc. As he went on, his argument

made a lot of sense. God is Spirit and no one has really seen Him. Jesus reveals God fully to us. When God spoke to Moses, there is nothing in the story that tells how God did it. We read words and our eyes transmit the pictures or symbols that our brain translates into words. We hear sound waves and our ears transmit signals that our brain translates into words. God created this process and He is perfectly capable of short circuiting it. He can move into our beings and let us “see” with our eyes closed, let us “hear” when there is no sound apparent to others. I don’t know what you would call what He does by His indwelling Spirit, but the “words” appear at our end of the process.

Oratio

Thus Moses had an experience of God which he put into the “words” that he “heard” God speak. Others saw lightning, and heard thunder on the mountain, though whether this took place at the moment that God “spoke” is not plain. God spoke truly, and God spoke plainly, and Moses recorded this experience, and related this experience in the words people used in his day.

Jesus said, “That which I have, that I speak.” When Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan River, the voice of God was heard by the fleshly ears of those standing near as He said, “This is my beloved Son, hear Him.” Most of what Jesus heard was inaudible to those around him. The prophets often related that God had spoken to them in a dream or vision. St Paul on the road to Damascus saw a light and heard the voice of Jesus. Others present heard the voice but saw nothing.

All of this is beside the point except to help us get past the idea that God only speaks audibly, only acts visibly. The “eyes and ears of the spirit” would refer to that ability we have to understand what God is saying to us even when it does not come in through our fleshly eyes and ears. We do have a human hurdle to surmount here. It is a hurdle made up of our spiritual arrogance. We ask God to guide us, we implore Him to tell us what to do, we beg Him to speak to us, and then we say, “Never mind, God, I just figured it out for myself.” We act as if the idea that came into our minds after asking God’s guidance

has nothing to do with God at all. This is not to say that every idea we have can be dignified with the phrase “God told me.” But certainly God does put ideas into our minds, gives us words to see and hear and know, that do not come through our outer sensory organs. The Bible is full of such cases. When we pray, we can listen for God’s answer with all of our heart, all of our soul and all of our mind.

Lectio

In the category of lectio, or reading, the most obvious way that God speaks to us is through His words to the inspired writers who wrote what we read in Scripture and in other inspired material. This is supremely true of the Bible. It is true to an important, but lesser degree, of the writings of other inspired men and women down through the centuries. Such writing stands the test of time if it is of God. Hence the religious classics have that test to commend them. The present proliferation of religious books, must be judged, one by one, to see if they are compatible with the teachings of the Bible, of the Church and with our own Christian experience.

Before my ordination I was required to state that I believed the Holy Bible to be the word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation, and I promised to teach it and preach it to the people committed to my charge. For years, I have read the Bible morning and evening. It is a great book, sometimes puzzling, sometimes cryptic, sometimes inspiring, sometimes bogged down in matters that seemingly have no reference to today’s living. I suppose that the greatest lesson I have learned from the Bible over the years is that while we are reading it, God is speaking to us. That makes it “the word of God” for me. As I read any of the translations *prayerfully* God speaks to me. Thus it becomes the *Word* of God, and I hear in my heart and mind the *words* of God.

One reason I have labored this point in this dissertation on prayer is that the words I receive are not always the words on the printed page before me. As I immerse myself in God’s book I not only read the things that men have recorded as God spoke to them, but God speaks to me personally and individually. Sometimes what He has to

say bears little relation to the text before me. It seems almost as if God is saying, “Now that I have your attention, there are a couple of other matters I want to talk to you about.” Have you ever had this experience?

Meditatio

Bible reading is prayer—one form of it. Prayer is communication with God, and God communicates with us through Scripture. It helps to read the Bible aloud, even to yourself. “Faith comes by hearing” has a proven psychological basis. Receiving the words through both eye and ear, and speaking them aloud at the same time reinforces what God has to say to us. We can read aloud, and then be quiet and continue to meditate on what we hear God saying. Private Bible reading for those who are not active in a church can lead to disaster. The New Testament knows no private Christianity. Christ comes to us in community, in that specific community that Abraham began and to which we belong today. The Bible is the book of that community, and we encounter God in the Bible. Trying to take the book without the community will lead to private interpretations and ultimate straying away.

God Himself is the ultimate safeguard to truth in reading the Bible. Despite our reverence for the book in our hands, we know that it is the end result of centuries of handing down memorized words, copying copies of copies, translating and retranslating. What was written down originally could only reduce to the limitation of words experiences which were beyond words. When I want to transmit to your mind a thought that is in my mind, I must try to put that thought into words and type it on this page. Then you must read these words and try to recover my original thought. The spoken word with gestures and facial expressions is often better...but we have God to help us with Bible words.

When color television is transmitted from the studio, one of the critical adjustments is that of color mix. A technician works to get just the right blend of reds, blues and greens. When network television reaches our local station, another technician adjusts the color mix

again. Now there is a new development. In the margin of the picture, in a part that we do not see, there is now encoded on the video signal precise information about the color mix. This can be read by a computer at the network and again at the station we tune to. Wonder of wonders, now they are making TV sets that will also read this code and adjust our color right at our set. The Creator of all things has also arranged that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets of old to set down their God-given thoughts in words, will also be with us as we read those words, so that we may prayerfully recover God's original communication to His people. We need not read the Bible alone because there can be a Presence with us to help us recreate the experience that lies behind the words on the page before us.

God speaks to us through other people. This is called prophecy. Try to see prophecy as something more than an Old Testament figure thundering out predictions of doom if Israel doesn't straighten up and do right. Those mighty words came from God, that is what made them prophetic. Prophecy is telling forth as much as it is foretelling. Often the telling forth makes plain what the future will be, particularly if the message from God is ignored. Sometimes when I ask God to show me the way, He sends me a person who tells me that in his prayer time he has been given something he believes he is to share with me. Thus God's answer to my need comes through the sharing of another. I may be used in the same way as an instrument for someone else's need. If God sometimes uses human instruments to meet our expressed needs, it should be obvious that He will use us, in turn, to meet the needs of others.

Just as the three beacon lights of guidance reinforce and serve as checks on one another, so all prophecy must be tested and checked for validity. The most common tests are: is it loving, is it in line with what we know about God from the lore and heritage of the faith (this includes the Bible) and does our own spirit witness to its rightness?

Contemplatio

The gift of wisdom shows itself very often when seeking God's will for our life. Without being given any new information, we

suddenly find ourself saying, “Ah so!” or “Aha!” because the picture has just cleared up. Then we wonder how we missed seeing it before, God has done that subtle thing in our heart and mind that lets us see the pattern He wants us to see. Our path becomes clear—nothing has been added to the situation, yet now we know what we are to do.

This experience of having light suddenly dawn and a perplexing situation become clear is not unique with Christians. The human mind is capable of putting together various bits of stored data and coming up with conclusions which go beyond the sum of the information possessed. It’s sometimes referred to as intuition. But again and again when this kind of a “*gesalt*” fails to occur, a Christian goes to prayer and soon thereafter we find the “aha!” gift operating. When this happens there is a good chance that God is guiding. In contemplative prayer, a believer seeks the presence of the One in Whom he believes, and sits in that presence until he or she knows.

The matter of receiving guidance and encouragement from God through dreams and visions has been well treated by two clergymen who follow the Jungian school of psychology. Morton Kelsey and John Sanford have gathered extensive data in this field. They make a good case for the fact that God gives His gifts sometimes to persons who in their dream life present to Him an open mind not otherwise available. In Acts 2, Peter quotes Joel 2:28-30, which promises that God will pour His Spirit in the “latter days” and that old men shall dream dreams and young men see visions. As to whether these are the “latter days” or not, I like to point out that these are the only days we have—and certainly there is abundant evidence that God is pouring out His Spirit in the world today.

Doing the Word, Individually: Reflect on the ways in which God speaks to you. Write down your conclusions.

Doing the Word in a Group: Undertake one of the following:

1. For a week, begin each day by seeking God’s help in some matter on which you need immediate guidance. Give God an opportunity to provide you with the idea, inspiration or feeling of peace you need.

2. If there is some major decision on which you need the Lord's guidance, put into practice some or all of the teachings in this chapter to seek the answer.

Share the results with the group.

CHAPTER 2

THE OBEDIENT PRAYER

Marjorie

The beginning of any prayer should be a request to the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction. It is explained in Romans 8:26, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we know not how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” If we are to pray correctly, we must look to the Spirit of God to lead our prayers.

We cannot possibly know all the facets or ramifications of a situation. While acting with the best intentions in the world we may be praying for something that is opposed to the will of God. We humans often think we know all the answers, especially when it concerns someone else. There is only One who can see the whole picture—every consequence of every act of every person—the chain reaction that is set in motion with every choice we make. When you think of it that way, our everyday choices become a bit scary. What a responsibility He has given us.

When viewed from this angle our prayers take on a new dimension. That weighty line from Jesus’ prayer to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done,” becomes especially important. That was called the “great nevertheless” by the late Estelle Carver. We may want a certain thing to happen with all our being, perhaps the healing of a loved one. We are told in Philippians 4:6, “In everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God,” and so we do pray for that healing, remembering to thank Him for all that He has already done in that life, and making our prayer contingent on that great nevertheless. “Lord, you know how very much I love this your servant. I thank you for him and all that you have done, and are doing, in his life, even as I pray. You know how much his healing means to me. I don’t know everything, but you do know, so while I am bringing

to you the prayer of my heart, nevertheless not my will but Thine be done.”

While we believe health and wholeness are always part of God’s perfect will for His children, we must be willing to release our prayer to Him to work out that will in His own way. How arrogant we are sometimes to think that we know better than God how to handle a situation.

If we ask guidance of the Holy Spirit as we begin our prayers we are not as apt to pray for the wrong things. He will bring to mind those things that are important for that particular prayer time. Sometimes, when He does this, we treat it as a stray thought; we tend to discount it as a wandering of the mind for which we apologize to God, when in fact, He may have given it to us for our prayer attention. Of course, we may override God’s guidance, and go ahead and pray with all our might for something that He is telling us deep inside is not His will. If we are going to ask His guidance, we must be obedient when He gives it. If, when we are ailing, we seek a doctor’s advice, and then go away and refuse to follow it, how can we hope to get well? By the same token, how can we hope to obtain that which we seek from God when we willfully reject His leading, and follow our own desires.

If, when our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, we will be still before God and listen for His voice as we pray, then He may help us to realize where we have gone against His guidance and closed the channel. We need to ask His forgiveness and come to Him with repentance. How much better it is to come into His presence full of joy and expectancy, knowing that we have followed His leading, and subjected our will to His. The first rule of obedience in prayer, then, is to ask guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit and to follow it when it comes.

The New Testament has many guidelines to help us know how to pray. In 1 John 3:21-23 we are told, “Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and we receive from Him whatsoever we ask, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” Can any of us honestly say that whatsoever we ask we receive?

In John 14:13 we read, “Whatsoever you ask in my Name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” Again in John 15:7, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” We read these familiar passages and somehow get the idea that God is an indulgent parent who always answers in the affirmative, regardless of our own behavior. Many people ask plaintively why they don’t get what they pray for when the Bible seems plainly to say that they will. Some even go so far as to say, “I prayed and nothing happened, so why should I bother? He doesn’t listen, or doesn’t care.” However, if you read those passages carefully, you will see that in every case something is expected of us. If we ignore our responsibilities, plainly set forth, then we should not be surprised if God ignores our request until we decide to be obedient. The choice is ours.

In the passage in 1 John we were told that our prayers would be answered “because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.” We all know that we sometimes do things that are not pleasing to God. They may seem like little, unimportant things to us, but if we continue to do them, *knowing* that they are not pleasing to God, then they become very large indeed, and we may well wonder why our prayers seem fruitless.

There is a children’s book entitled *Jimmy and the White Lie* in which a childish fib to his parents began to haunt little Jimmy until it grew and grew. The great white monster lie filled all his mind and heart, and even all the rooms in his house. Finally, it followed him down the street. He became so frightened, and so full of remorse, that he had to confess it to his mother, who very wisely led him to confess it to God, who, of course, forgave him. In that wonderful forgiveness, Jimmy experienced such a relief, and release, that the white monster lie disappeared and he was back in a right relationship with his parents and God.

How like children we are, to think that we can cheat and lie, even though it may seem like a little white lie, or break God’s commandments, even in what we consider to be a “small way,” or indulge in those so-called “respectable sins” such as gossip, back-biting,

jealousy, anger, (you can name many more) and yet still come to Him on our terms, disregarding completely what He expects of us. No, my friends, it does not work that way. God's forgiveness is a wonderful gift, but to receive it we must first recognize our failure to measure up, to be truly sorry for that failure, and to repent (to turn away from it) and determine to amend our lives. Then we must ask His forgiveness. With that, God's forgiveness flows over us and our sin, and washes both clean and restores a right relationship with him.

It is as if God says to us, "I invite you to come and live in my Kingdom, to enjoy my mercy, protection and bounty, and to partake of all the good things I have arranged for you. There are a few rules in this Kingdom, as in any kingdom, by which you must abide if you wish to remain here. The first is to acknowledge Me as King and follow the law of the land. If you do not choose to live by these rules then you are free to go and live in some other kingdom. I give you that choice."

If we have made the decision to live in His Kingdom, and have turned our lives over into His keeping, then we will want to keep His commandments and do our best to please Him in all our actions. Many people forget that in order to have answered prayer something is expected of us. We know that there is nothing we can do to earn, or deserve, His love or His gifts, but we are expected to return that love, to walk in His way and follow His teachings. How wonderful it is when "our hearts do not condemn us" and we can have confidence before God, because we know we are keeping His commandments and doing what pleases Him. He, in His great mercy, hears our prayers and answers them, as may be most expedient for us. How comforting, then, to read John 14:13, "Whatever you ask in my Name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

But now we must raise the question, are we really asking for things that will glorify God? If we will examine our prayer requests I think we'll soon see that many of them are purely selfish in motive and cater to our own desires and pleasures. Sometimes I think that we forget that we are on this earth for only one purpose and that is to glorify God. Surely our prayer life should reflect this.

Look again at John 15:7: "If you abide in Me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will." What does it mean to abide in

Christ? When Jesus said these words he had just been telling the disciples that he was the vine and they were the branches. If we are to be branches of the vine, we must realize that branches have no independent life of their own. They must stay in living union with the vine so that the sap, or life, may flow in and through them. The leaves, buds, blossoms and fruit belong to the vine, not to the branch. If the branch is cut off, it withers and dies. It can no longer nourish the fruit.

For us to abide in Christ is to be like that branch—in living union, a member of His body—letting his life flow in and through us, subjecting our will to his. The leaves, buds, blossoms and fruit will be evident in our lives and bear witness to that verse, “by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” Bearing fruit carries out the will of God, encourages other Christians and bears witness to the world that God’s love is at work, through us.

The passage also says that we are to let his words abide in us. Do we spend time every day reading his words in the Bible? Do we commit any of them to memory so that they will abide in us? The Bible is where God tells us what His will is. If we never look at it how can we possibly know? In this fascinating book God actually reveals the greater part of His plan for our lives. Why are we not reading it every chance we get? Why are we not making time to immerse ourselves in it? Why are we not hungry to know what wonders our Father has planned for us? In our apathy we are missing a great deal, but worse than that, we are being disobedient to God’s command to let His words abide.

A pray-er is obedient. Note these words from Psalm 103:17-18: “The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, upon those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.”

Deeply Personal Prayer

There are times in our lives when our whole being is filled with concern, worry and anxiety for another, whether the problem is physical, mental or relational. We can become so wrapped up in

another person's life it is impossible to see clearly all the facets of the problem. We just want to help. Often we begin to tell God how to solve this particular case, and go on and on with all the details of the situation, as if God is not aware of what is happening and it is up to us to tell Him about it.

In our anguish we pour out words and suggestions to God and never stop to realize that He may have some answers of His own. I have often wondered what God must think when we—insignificant and ignorant creatures that we are—begin to instruct Him in problem solving. Surely He understands our deep concern and waits patiently for us to run down and then He goes to work on our case in His own way.

I am reminded of a young clergyman in a very old and aristocratic congregation. The women of the church continually told him what he was to do and how to do it. He always listened politely and sympathetically and then went ahead and did what he thought was right. I wonder if God does that to us.

It is helpful if we have a regular period of preparation for prayer as we come to our prayer time. This will aid us in putting worry and anxiety aside as we get quiet before God. The key to this time is to get the focus of our attention on *Him* instead of on our problems. Thus it is good to begin with praise and adoration, which are God-centered, rather than with supplication, which has to do with *our* needs. As we said earlier, the first part of our prayer time should include our request to the Holy Spirit to lead us so that we know we are praying in God's will. It is no use asking for something that is not His will to grant. That 's like two people paddling the same canoe in opposite directions. You don't get anywhere.

First, ask God to show you how you should pray for the person on your heart. In asking God's guidance in our prayers we are saying, "Not my will, but Thine be done." Sometimes it is easy to imagine that, because we love that person so much, and know them so well, we know what is best for them. We forget that God knows and loves them far better than we. We are saying, "Please, Father, help me to bring my will in line with yours, knowing that what *You* will is right—whatever the outcome." That is not easy to do, and is a measure of our faith. We

must truly trust God with the problem. If we don't, there is not much point in praying.

Many times all that we can do is to put the person or situation into His hands and leave it there, expecting Him to take it and work it out in the best way for all concerned. That does not mean that we are through with our part. If we are to be an open channel for God's grace to flow to another person, then that channel must remain open. That means that we must continue to pray for that person, lifting them up and thanking God for what His is doing in them. The prayer that Rufus Womble, past Warden of the Order of St. Luke, uses in his healing work is, "Thank You, God, for your healing love at work in so-and-so." You can do this dozens of times a day. This constant awareness of God, and of the person on our hearts, keeps us open and available to be used as a tool in God's hands to accomplish His purpose.

Our attitude makes a great deal of difference. We must be optimistic and expectant. We must *believe* with all our heart that God is going to do something. A pessimistic attitude drags down both ourselves and the object of our prayers and will definitely clog up the channel with our own unbelief. We must always be available in case the prayer is to be answered through some inspired action of our own. Pessimism may close our minds to the answer. We must be careful always to pray the answer rather than the problem. To dwell solely on the problem, instead of the answer, to pray always about the sickness rather than the healing, makes us ineffective as a channel, or a possible carrier of the solution. If we truly believe that God will handle the situation, then we can have peace about it. That does not necessarily mean that we will be *happy* about His solution. We may be heart-broken, but at the same time know without a doubt, that it is best. The same spirit of God who leads us to answers, helps us to accept them.

Discipline in our spiritual life is a great help. Sometimes there is a great difference in what we *know* intellectually to be true, and the way we *feel* about it. That is the time to go back to our basic beliefs and tell ourselves that God does indeed love us, and wants what is best for us. When darkness threatens to engulf us we must hold on to that rock-hard fact. He is still God, and He is still able to bring us through the dark places into His marvelous light. Our *feelings* have nothing to do

with it. A solid, reasoned, tested faith, knowing what we believe in advance, will stand firm in times of emotional stress. Unshakable faith is a gift from God, a gift He is ready and able to give, whenever we are ready to receive.

An important help in times of personal stress is that which is familiar. Familiar places and familiar routines help carry us through. When we find ourselves in a state of fear and worry concerning a loved one, we can often gain comfort and reassurance from the familiar liturgy of our church service. At the same time, familiar settings may also hold reminders that the single problem occupying us is not *all* that we should be praying about. There is a wider world of love and concern than our anguished tunnel vision is letting us see. This broadened view is health giving.

When we are the object of our prayer, the problem can be just as difficult. It is hard to pray for our own healing when we are seriously ill, or in great pain. It is not easy to gather our scattered thoughts and concentrate on Jesus. Sometimes medication makes it difficult to think clearly. All we can think about is the pain, or the misery. It is good in that case to ask someone else to pray for us—clergy, friend, family member or prayer group. It is hard to understand why people will not share their needs with friends, so that those friends can then add their prayers to the situation and act as vehicles for God's healing light. I don't mean that we should recount all our ailments whenever we have a captive audience, but we can quietly ask help when we need it. We pray for others, let us not hesitate to give others the opportunity to pray for us.

God answers prayer for help in so many ways. Sometimes He uses a resource He has given us earlier, and which we have not yet seen as the gift of God that it really is. I remember a time when I had surgery and the wound had not drained properly. I had to go to the doctor's office for a particularly painful treatment. As I neared the office, dread built up in me until I was filled with fear of the pain that I knew was coming. I tried to pray as I sat in the waiting room, but all I could say was, "Help me, Lord, Oh please help me. Lord, don't let me cry!"

As I was putting on the gown (that simple garment that sees so much misery) God answered my prayer by bringing to mind the words of a little song I had heard recently... “Precious Lord, take my hand....”

Stretched on the examination table the rest of the words came. There under the sheet I seemed to put my hand in His warm grasp and repeated the words over and over...

“Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, help me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the dark, through the night,
Lead me on to the light,
Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me home.”

In a matter of minutes it was all over and I had felt nothing! Only pressure of the doctor’s hands as he worked on me, but no pain at all. Sometimes “help” is all we can say, but He hears and knows the need and is there with us.

Doing the Word, Individually: How can you pray more positive, more confident “in God’s will” prayers? Try it.

Doing the Word as a Group: From this study—and from your own knowledge or study of what is said about prayer in the Bible—make a list of “guidelines for effective prayer” and discuss the findings with the members of the group.

CHAPTER 3

HINDRANCES TO PRAYER

Marjorie

At one time or another all of us have asked the big question, “Why? Why me? Why did that happen to such a good person? Why am I so afraid? Why, Why, Why!” One of the most frequent and plaintive “whys” is, “Why are my prayers not answered?” Involved in the answer to that question is our responsibility to be obedient to God’s laws if we are to receive His gifts. While there is nothing we can do to *earn* His love, we can, by refusing to try to meet His requirements, move out from under His protection. It is our choice.

By the same token, the Scripture gives us seven specific hindrances to prayer. If we want our prayers to obtain results we must be sure that we do our best to remove any blocks that we can discern. It is no good standing before God with one hand out and the other behind our back with fingers crossed! As I bring these hindrances before you, you might examine your own life to see if any apply.

The first is found in Proverbs 21:13. “He who closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself cry out and not be heard.” It is the one who gives generously to others who receives generously from God. Stinginess is a great hindrance to prayer. Luke 6:38 tells us to “Give, and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

The cry of the poor may come from those who are spiritually poor as well as from the materially poor. Many times we fail to share our wealth of faith in a magnificent God with someone who is starving spiritually. There are many ways people can “cry out” to us. It may be evident in the way they react when we are around. Some may be envious of an obvious peace of mind and heart in the midst of chaos, or perhaps they notice a quiet joy or inner radiance. Or, quite the contrary, they may ridicule our religion, or our allegiance to Jesus

Christ, because they do not understand, but wish they could. These reactions indicate a poverty of faith that cries out for help.

If our peace of mind and joy of heart came from a new physician, medication or some new “Know Yourself” movement, we would be quick to tell our friends all about it, so that they, too, might try it. Why is it that we clam up and keep the good news of Jesus Christ all to ourselves? When we fail to share our blessings with those in desperate need of him, that constitutes a hindrance to prayer.

For the materially poor, Jesus was very explicit. In Matthew 5:42, he told the crowd, “Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.” We may think that if we follow that advice we will soon be destitute ourselves with all the demands made on us today. Yet, we can’t out give God. The more we give, the more He gives back to us! I don’t believe that He meant for us to share what we have until there is no more, so that we must beg others to share with us. It has been evident in our lives that when we share until it hurts, He replaces it, so that we can go on sharing.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells of the Son of Man coming in his glory and who, like a shepherd, will separate the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right side and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”

Then he said a startling thing—he said that the people on his right hand would be surprised and ask him when they had done all those things to him. They didn’t remember doing all that. He would answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.”

Those people had given of themselves to help others, not just because he had commanded it, but because of the love he had given them. His ever-flowing love was to be shared—not hoarded—and so they reached out in love to their brothers and sisters in need. They let Jesus minister his love through them.

To those “goats” on his left, he said, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink...” Then they, too, were surprised and asked when they had not served him, and he answered, “Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.”

Many Christians today talk a great self-righteous game of religion, and are wrapped up in “churchwork” and “doing things for the Lord,” and at the same time turn a deaf ear to their neighbors in the community, and the world, who are crying out for help. As long as this continues to be so, many prayers will not be answered.

The second hindrance to prayer is found in Isaiah 59:1-2. “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened that it cannot save, nor His ear dull that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He does not hear.”

Isaiah goes on to make a long list of the iniquities of the people that are separating them from God. For that is what sin is—anything that separates us from God. Christians, by and large, are not murderers or thieves or drunkards, and so we tend to think that we aren’t so bad after all. In comparison to some folks we know, we’re practically angels! Well, friends, we have no business comparing ourselves with anyone else, but only comparing what we are with what we ought to be.

1 John 1:18 tells us, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Or, as Bob, my husband, puts it, “If you say you have no sin—that will do for one.” We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Many people who pray and pray, and receive no answer, think that God has lost His power and is no longer able. Of course that isn’t so. As we read, “His arm is just as mighty and His ear just as open,” but our end of the communication channel may be clogged with our own sins, so that the message can’t get through. When this happens, to remedy the situation and reopen the channel, we naturally must clean it out, get rid of all the debris. We can say, as in Psalm 139:23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me.” Then we quiet our spirit before Him and wait until He

puts His finger on that spot that is not pleasing to Him. He will show us what it is if we are open and listening. We confess that sin, determine to give it up and put it behind us. We ask His forgiveness and are restored to a right relationship with clear, open channels of communication.

The third hindrance to prayer is found in Ezekiel 14:3. God speaks to Ezekiel, “Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I let myself be inquired of at all by them?”

God calls Ezekiel the “Son of Man,” as Jesus called himself many years later. These elders of Israel came to Ezekiel to ask him to inquire of God for them. One would think that they would be pious men, and sincere in their seeking after God. Ezekiel could not know what was in their hearts, and God spoke to him before he had a chance to respond to them. God saw into their hearts and knew what manner of men they were. He said, “Never mind, Ezekiel—I’ll answer them myself!” And what an answer He gave them. “Therefore say to the house of Israel, thus says the Lord God: ‘Repent and turn away from your idols and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to inquire for himself of me, I, the Lord will answer him myself; and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and you shall know that I am the Lord’” (Ezekiel 14:6-8).

As Philippians 3:19 puts it, “...whose affections are placed upon the wealth of the world, and the pleasures of the senses, whose god is their money or their belly.” Some who have no statues of false gods can have idols in their hearts, which is even more a usurpation of God’s throne. Today we can make idols of money, home, social position, etc. We hear such lines as “We’d like to tithe, but we are building a new home,” or, “I simply can’t witness for Christ; what would my friends think? Surely God will understand that.” Oh, He understands, all right. He understands that if you put anything or anyone in the supreme place in your heart, you have separated from Him. That place must be reserved for God alone. As Matthew Henry

said in the 17th century, “If he continue in love and league with his idols, and comes to inquire of God, God will count it as an indignity done to Him, and will answer him according to his real iniquity, not according to his pretended piety.”

The fourth hindrance to prayer is found in Mark 11:25. “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father who is in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” An unforgiving spirit is one of the commonest hindrances to prayer. We frequently, and glibly, say in the Lord’s prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Perhaps we should say, “Forgive us our trespasses *insofar* as we forgive.” Have we stopped to consider how we feel about the slights, offenses, rudenesses, or unkindnesses that happen to all of us? What are our true feelings toward those who hurt or anger us? For a starter, just listen to our conversations with friends or family.

“Do you know what she did?” “Just wait till I get my hands on him!” “Well, she won’t get a chance to hurt me again” ...and so on and on and on. Forgive? I don’t think so. Yet, Jesus tells us that he will forgive us *our* sins only if we learn to forgive others *their* sins.

You may ask, “Do you mean even Sally who keeps telling those lies about me?” Yes. “Even that bully in the next block who keeps beating up my son?” Yes. “You mean that man who knocked me down and stole my purse?” Yes. “What about that man who cheated me out of thousands of dollars?” Yes.

The New Testament is full of teaching on the subject of forgiveness. There is no softness suggesting that self-righteous indignation or anger takes the place of forgiveness. When Jesus was asked by Peter how often he must forgive his brother—was seven times enough? Jesus answered in no uncertain terms, “Not seven times, Peter, but 70 times seven.” Our petty grudges, hurts and offenses must go. We must overlook them and go our way rejoicing in a heavenly Father who can forgive even our own sins and wickedness.

The fifth hindrance to prayer is found in James 1:5-7. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. *But* let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that

is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.”

There’s that “but” again, that stickler, that shows us that we have a part to play. Those seem to be hard lines. That doesn’t sound like a loving Father, does it? Lest you forget, I hasten to remind you that in that special kingdom that I mentioned earlier, there were a few stringent rules by which to live. The first and foremost was to believe. If we believe that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, then we must surely believe that he speaks the truth.

He told us plainly that if we would live in his kingdom, by his rules, then he would care for us and meet our every need, would bear our burdens, and fill us with his love. Do we believe him? If we do, then our prayers for help should be positive, knowing that he will hear and answer in the best possible way for us.

Why, then, are we so often hesitant or skeptical? Why do we pray only half believing that something will happen? Did Jesus speak the truth or didn’t he? Why are people so shocked and amazed when someone is completely healed through prayer? Didn’t they expect it when they prayed? If they didn’t, why were they praying?

A woman I know was delighted and surprised when she was healed of a long standing, painful ailment. As she expressed it, “I’ve always believed in spiritual healing, but for others, not for myself!” Was she some sort of untouchable whom God wouldn’t bother with? Or were her problems too much for Him? Or maybe she was just too insignificant for Him to notice. Why should we set ourselves apart from our fellow Christians as if we were some sort of special case? God loves us all, just as we are, and can take care of all our needs, just as He promised.

If we do not believe that God meant what He said, then we have made Him a liar. Hebrews 3:12 tells us, “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt into the wilderness, God promised that He would take care of them and meet all their needs. He constantly showed them His mighty power through one

miracle after another. Psalm 78:32 says, “In spite of all this they still sinned; despite His wonders, they did not believe.” They did not believe that He would really take care of them, and they grumbled and fussed every step of the way, until finally, when they flatly refused to follow His leading, He withdrew His protection and told them they would all die in the wilderness, and none of them, save only two who did believe, would be allowed to enter into the land He had promised—their children would inherit instead.

Well, you might be thinking, that’s easy for her to say, but how do you turn on belief when it just isn’t there? That is a legitimate question. I think it’s safe to say that as Christians we believe in the overall power, presence, and knowledge of God, and of His immeasurable goodness and love. It is fairly easy to believe those things because it’s so generalized. But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of whether I believe He will heal my painful arthritis, or my heart condition, then we begin to waver. We want to believe that He cares and wants us completely well. The key word is *want*, we *want* to believe, we are *willing* to believe.

Remember the Scripture passage in Mark 9:17-27 about the man whose child had an unclean spirit? He said to Jesus, “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus answered him in no uncertain terms, “If you can!” (I love that exclamation point). “If you can! All things are possible to him who believes.” That father was very like we are; he did believe, enough to come and ask help, but there were some reservations. He dared not hope too much. He threw himself on the mercy of Jesus and said, “I believe; help my unbelief.” That is all it takes, a willingness to believe and God will do the rest.

The sixth hindrance to prayer comes from James 4:3, “You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” A selfish purpose in prayer is likely to close the ear of God to our petitions. We may be praying for something that is perfectly all right, and acceptable to God, and in His will to grant, but if we are praying with a selfish motive it probably won’t get beyond the ceiling.

Sometimes we are not aware of the real root of our prayers. On the surface, they may seem quite sincere and in the interest of others, but a thorough examination of our true motives may show something

quite different, so that in the end they may be to our own glory and not to God's. The following little story may, perhaps, illustrate the difference.

A casual, run-of-the-mill "pew sitter" was invited to attend a renewal conference with some friends. Hoping for a little vacation and rest, she accepted the invitation, not knowing what to expect of the conference, but inwardly sure it would be S.O.S.—same old stuff. Much to her surprise she was caught up in an atmosphere of love and excitement, and at first was totally bewildered by it all. But that frozen churchwoman gradually thawed out in the warmth of the Christian love all around her, and for the first time really came to know the person of Jesus Christ. She ended the four days a new, radiant, dedicated and on-fire Christian.

Going from the mountaintop back into the valley is one of the hardest trips we make, especially when those we left in the valley have never seen the mountain. What do we say to them? How can we possibly communicate the wonder and joy of our experience? It is no use to try to carry on just as before, we are different creatures. What to do?

Well, the woman in our story did all the wrong things. She could not contain her joy and newfound enthusiasm for the things of God. Bubbling over, she dumped it all on the husband she loved—and nearly drowned him! The poor man was also a casual pew-sitter and didn't know what had hit her, or him. He was acutely embarrassed by it all. The more she talked and bubbled, the further he withdrew. He was sure she had gone round the bend; and their friends were beginning to think so, too, and were avoiding her as much as possible.

Naturally she was crestfallen (literally, she fell off the crest of her mountaintop with a hard crash). Her husband did not understand, and she could not share this precious gift she had received. She didn't want him to think she was crazy, and so she began to pray that he, too, would have an experience of conversion, so that he would share with her and not think she was losing her marbles.

That may seem to be a good prayer object: the conversion of one's mate. But the motive left something to be desired. Where was there any glory to God in that prayer or that motive? Have you ever

felt manipulated by someone, that you were being used for their private purposes? Remember how you resented it? I think we sometimes try to use God to manipulate people, to make them do what we want them to do. That kind of prayer will surely not go very far, because God will not be used to carry out our selfish aims.

The seventh hindrance to prayer is in 1 Peter 3:7. “Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.” A wrong relationship between husband and wife is definitely a hindrance to prayer. Some women take great exception to the Bible passages having to do with Christian marriage, or marriage as God intended it to be. They feel that women are relegated to second place and men are exalted. I believe that if they will read those passages more carefully they will get a very different meaning.

God made male and female, fully equal, but with very different functions. They fit together as two halves of one whole being. One half can not realize its full potential without the other. Each half has its own part to play. When one begins to encroach on the other, it is denying the other the opportunity to fulfill its own role. The union of two people who love God and each other, and take responsibility for their own parts in that union, will be a beautiful family unit. That is not to say that one cannot help the other, or play a dominant role when the other is ill. That is part of the plan, to work out problems together. That is quite different from taking over by show of force or temperament.

The most powerful machine will not run properly unless all its parts are well oiled and cared for, each doing its own special job. A marriage is like that. If one partner gets out of line it causes friction. If the friction is allowed to go unheeded, the marriage machine begins to make noises and develops strange configurations, and may soon come to a jarring halt.

The oil of love must be administered by the other half of the union until the machine is running smoothly again. Prayer is a powerful force to release love that has not been able to flow. My washing machine has a special feature that I like. When it is time for

the spinning cycle to begin, if the load is unbalanced so that it can't take off in a proper spin, a loud buzzer sounds. It tells me that I must re-arrange the load so that it is in balance again. Then it spins at a rapid rate without bouncing all around the floor. That's rather like marriage. When the load is unbalanced, it will surely give off signals. A little tender loving care goes a long way to correct it.

God means for us to live in love and harmony with our fellow humans, and that certainly includes our spouse. We all know people who are kind, thoughtful and understanding to all their friends, and then growl and bark at their mates and children, as if they had used up their quota of goodness on everyone else.

Well, friends, this sort of thing just won't work if we want God to hear our prayers. It brings us face to face with that kingdom again. Will we abide by its rules, or won't we?

Doing the Word Individually: Which hindrance or hindrances to prayer might apply to you? What are you going to do about it?

Doing the Word as a Group: Assign each member of the group at least one of the hindrances to prayer mentioned in this chapter so as to come to the meeting prepared to discuss both the hindrance and some ways of overcoming it.

CHAPTER 4

PRAYER GROUPS

There is a difference between praying in a group and prayer groups. A group can be gathered together for another purpose and offer prayer. But a prayer group gathers to pray, and gathers regularly to pray regularly. This is not to say that prayer groups may not do other things. In fact, our experience indicates that groups which meet several needs have a longer life expectancy than those groups which do nothing but pray. Some time spent in Scripture reading or study, some time spent in sharing, some in fellowship, all help to bring out the total meaning of prayer, the many ways in which God speaks to us and we to Him.

There are many excellent books on small group theory and mechanics, so we shall not attempt to deal with that subject in general. What might be helpful here is to share with you some of the things that we have found especially useful in the prayer groups we have been in. There is a power in group prayer that is not the same as in individual prayer. I am not speaking of ganging up on God, but of something true in many human fields of endeavor. Man is a social animal and he often finds his highest fulfillment in something he does in company with others. For some kinds of prayer this is especially true. We find that in addition to our private, personal and peculiarly individual conversations with God, that there is great strength and help in praying also in the company of others in some way other than liturgically.

There is a growing consciousness of community among religious people today. This awareness is helping stem the rising tide of privatism in religion which may have its roots in our peculiarly American individualism. In public worship, this privatism shows in many who fail to involve themselves with the others present. For some, there is not more interaction with the other worshippers present than there would be with those in adjacent seats at a movie theater. A football game probably stimulates more comradery among strangers than sharing the same pew in church. To come to worship, to do one's own private thing, and then to depart without any real consciousness

of being part of the family of God is to miss something that ought to be an integral part of groups at prayer. It is perhaps true that there is more sense of community in the non-liturgical churches than in those whose liturgy calls for united prayers and praises. Praying and praising in unison is not always the same as praying and praising together.

In a prayer group, this difficulty is overcome. One gets quite involved in the lives of fellow members of the group, even if there is no personal encounter at any other place. When the group joins together in prayer, there is a real sense of “agreeing together” before God. (Matthew 18-19) When the group joins in lifting you and your needs up to God, there is a solid feeling of support from an entity who cares and acts.

Prayer groups are normally “closed” groups. For anything in Christianity to be “closed” sounds bad at the outset, so let me explain. The purpose of a prayer group is to allow Christians to band together with congenial others, to make common cause in their prayer lives. Its primary purpose is not evangelistic, or pastoral but mutual. To have mutuality and congeniality, there needs to be a selection process. As it begins, the group might be quite open to a wide variety of people who are willing to fall in with its purpose. As it forms and gets underway, the doors to the outside close, and the group begins to go deep together. For an outsider to come in, after the group passes a certain point, raises many questions. Does he/she know what we’re talking about? Is this a person with whom we dare share privileged information? The harmony and the homogeneity of the group are broken. Even so, the group may wish to go through this process in order to “fit in” a new person that one or more of the members feels could be a part of the group. Or, on occasion, the group may welcome a visitor known to be a skilled member of another group, one who can be presumed to “know the rules” and make themselves at home very quickly.

One of the things that is essential if a prayer group is to reach its full potential is that there be built up a trust level of strong proportions. This trust level will allow the members to communicate with one another at a depth they would not be able to reach with strangers, or even friends from other segments of their lives. This trust

says, “I know you will not laugh at what I am going to say, or think less of me for bringing it up. I know that, in this group, I can let the “real me” show. I know that what I say will not go beyond these walls except as it rises to heaven in our prayers.” Any group of people can come together for prayer, but what we mean by a “prayer group” is a collection of Christians who have gathered together long enough, and often enough, to have this unique trust relationship with one another in the field of praying and sharing together.

Dave Stoner, who has, in the past, done extensive work with Yokefellow and Faith at Work, teaches that most small groups should have a time contract. They should be formed to last for a definite number of weeks, or months, and then automatically be dissolved. If they want to reform identically, they can; but the opportunity exists to exit gracefully, or to coalesce around another center, to include, or exclude as may seem best. Some of the problems of personality that loom large in small groups can well be handled by periodic “starting over.” Marjorie and I would agree with that, although it happens that in our own experience we have not belonged to a group with a time contract. We have seen situations which would have been helped by such a contract.

Another vital aspect of prayer groups is the co-mingling of lives, the involvement, one with another, the knowing, understanding and caring for persons not “blood kin.” Let me speak of three aspects of this. First, it is important that all Christians know, understand and care for people outside their own home. We know this truth academically, but seldom do much about it. We have our friends outside of our own families, but they are usually people to whom we are attracted by mutuality of interest, of likes and dislikes. We are congenial with them. Quite often there will be people in our prayer group with whom we are not congenial at all. We don’t have to like their style, or be comfortable with their personality, to come into a very deep relationship of loving and caring and sharing. I imagine that most people, like myself, find it easier to love people that they also like. I always feel a little guilty about that fact. A prayer group gives us exercise in doing the very thing our conscience tells us we should have been doing for a long time. We may move into the lives of people with

whom we would not otherwise associate, and we are made richer and fuller for doing so. The experience may well rub off on other associations we have in the world outside our group.

The second thing is the other side of the same coin. Most of us need to be sharing with persons who are different, who will not share our attitude toward things, but who will understand. It is good for us to get some of our “corners knocked off” by such associations. In the world we meet plenty of people who do not agree with us, but there we have, perhaps, an adversarial relationship with them. When our family members don’t agree with us, often there is a conspiracy of silence. On certain subjects they have long since given up trying to reflect back to us exactly the way we are coming across to them. In a prayer group on the other hand, there is an opportunity on many levels to see oneself in a new light, because we are not just seeing oneself through the eyes of friends and admirers. There are groups which make a point of self analysis and mutual advisement. I am not speaking primarily of such a group, already programmed to do this, but of the propensity of any prayer group made up of diverse people to let us see ourselves at a deep level in a way that we need to see ourselves.

The third thing we find so important about belonging to a caring, sharing group, is that this is one of the primary ways in which God speaks to us. As others speak in a group gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, God speaks to us, through them. God’s revelation to His world continues in our day, and His particular, specific revelation to each one of us comes through Scripture, prayer and the words of others. Of course, as it comes through the words of others it is a form of prayer, God’s side of it, God speaking to us. In all our travels, our attendance at various conferences, our own speaking, praying and reading, Marjorie and I find it absolutely vital to be a part of some sharing group, or we close one of the important avenues through which our Father makes His will known to us.

If we are commanded to pray, and if prayer is effective in getting God’s will done in the world, then we dare not neglect any proven, useful way of prayer. Prayer groups are just that. They do a job that private and individual prayer does not do; therefore prayer groups

are a vital part of the Christian environment, and most of us should be part of one.

The Christian family provides a built-in prayer group of a different kind. The personality problems of living in one household cannot help but affect the life of a group that prays together as a family. This makes the prayers more poignant, and the supporting of one another in joys and sorrows easier to express. Brother and sister can fight like cats and dogs over who did what to whom, yet when it comes time for brother to say a word at family prayers about sister's important exam coming up, or sister to lift up a thought about brother's appearance at traffic court, then the deep love of family members for one another comes through. There are many ways for families to structure their prayer life together, the most common being a brief time around the table at a common meal. This might require that the TV be turned off, and that all family members sit down at the same time, but the values served are eminently worthwhile. Neither parents nor children should do all the praying—at each level it is something that every child of God should do.

There are excellent books of family prayers and of suggestions as to how your family might structure its prayer time. For a bride and groom, prayer before sleeping makes certain that the “sun does not go down on their wrath.” One can pray with a spouse until all problems have been faced, and peace about them found. Newlyweds will find their night time prayer one of the most intimate things they can do together.

Prayer on the telephone has become very common. I do not refer to the “Dial-A-Prayer” outlets, although they are sometimes helpful. Rather, I would call your attention to the many opportunities that exist to pray for someone by telephone when you cannot be with them to pray in person. Often when someone is in a situation of stress, they call me and ask for prayer. Where I might once have promised to pray for them, now I ask if they would like prayer right now, right there on the phone. It is very effective, private and quiet, really a good way to pray. You can do it for others as well as have it done for you.

Doing the Word Individually: Are you in a prayer group? Why not?

Doing the Word in a Group: Discuss and receive viewpoints on each of the aspects of group prayer discussed in the chapter.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT WE MAY EXPECT OF PRAYER

Have you ever watched a parade which contained many bands? Sooner or later you'll see a band coming that is out of step with the music you hear. As it draws closer the music fades and you see why they seemed out of step. They are marching to a different beat. It is said of someone who appears to be out of step with the rest of their peer group that they are marching to a different drum. Sometimes it is difficult to determine just what drum they hear, because we don't hear it at all.

Those who work in hospitals frequently observe folks who appear to be marching to a different drum. Although suffering, these folks are cheerful. Although pronounced medically incurable, they radiate hope. Although those around them have given up, they are full of plans. What is this drum they hear? What dimly sensed music is coming in loud and clear for them?

These are folks who have prayed and who believe, these are children of God who are living out their prayers. They have entrusted their physical state, not only to their medical therapists, but to the Creator Himself, and now they are content, living and acting out their trust in Him. Whatever may come of their physical problem, they have made their peace with the situation, not be accepting it blindly, but by entrusting the outcome to a God who is trustworthy.

Living out the implications of our prayer life takes place in many realms. It is a kind of "follow through" that has a lot to do with the effectiveness of our prayers. Just as the follow through in golf or tennis has a lot to do with the success of our stroke, so we need to remember the word "amen" is not necessarily the end of our prayer effort. How does this work? Let me illustrate.

If we pray for strength to complete a task we need, count on that strength and hang in there. If we pray for guidance in making a choice, we should use the brains God gave us to consider the data and then decide. If we pray for healing of mind, body or spirit we should

use every resource available for that healing, and trust the results to Him. If we pray for a friend it is best to display a positive attitude about what is to happen. If we pray for our community we should offer ourself as part of the solution.

To pray is not simply to transfer responsibility for a need to Another, it is to involve ourself with Him in the meeting of that need. Thus prayer needs to be lived out carefully, consciously and yet serenely. When we are instructed to “cast all our cares on Him who cares for us,” that is not permission to remove ourselves from the resolution of those cares. Rather it is to call into the situation One who has both the plan and the power to resolve it. That resolution may well call for us to play a very active role.

Pre-figuring God’s Answers—Manipulating God

When we first moved to Candlewood Farm in North Florida, we put in a huge garden. There were long rows of beans and dozens of tomato plants. How easy it is for someone new to farming to sit down then, and begin to plan how to spend the profits from the bushels of beans and the tons of tomatoes. It doesn’t take many seasons of dealing with Mother Nature to learn that you’d better not plan too far ahead. When the crop is in, and the money is in the bank, then it is time to plan the spending of it.

In like manner, in dealing with our Father God, or in responding to His dealings with us, it is usually better to be certain just how He wants to work His purpose out before going too far out on a limb. This is not to say that we shouldn’t trust God; we can trust Him. We can trust Him to be consistent, to love us, to want good for us, etc. But we usually think of trusting someone, and considering their future behavior to be predictable as the same thing. The mind of man is not big enough to fathom the mind of the Creator. A friend of mine who died recently had not made a will because he believed that Jesus was coming again soon, and there would be no need to dispose of earthly goods. His prediction went beyond the evidence.

With God we can be sure of His love, of His desire to help us, to give us eternal and abundant life, to be with us, to indwell us. God’s

track record in these things is one of absolute consistency, so that we have no reason to doubt His motives at all. His performance, His methods, the ways that He will choose to act in our lives, these things are based on a knowledge and a wisdom completely beyond our understanding. Oh, we might understand what God is up to in a particular situation if we had as much information about all the factors in that case as He does. Even then our wisdom is finite, and His infinite.

The point here is that we can trust the Lord of the Universe to do good, to wish us well, and to act benignly according to the situation as it really is. To try to predict what form this action will take goes beyond our ability and our knowledge. He may give us this knowledge as part of His action, but unless He does this, we are on dangerous ground in trying to predict.

That being true, our prayers should be specific as to need, and flexible as to the ways and means of meeting that need. Too often we come to God with a detailed prescription for His activity, and we even bring a gang with us to make sure He gets our message as to exactly what we want done. Surely it is counter-productive to try to teach the God of the Universe His business. We are instructed to make our needs known, but to fail to leave Him the freedom to meet those needs in His own way is to make ourselves unavailable as channels for Him to use in an alternate way. It would seem from the evidence that one of the ways God sometimes teaches us is to let us have exactly what we asked for in such detail and then let us try to live with the results.

Trusting Prayer—God’s Timing

Have you ever encountered a series of lines of waiting people at the supermarket, bank, post office or airport and begun switching from line to line, trying to guess which one will get you through faster? Generally speaking, they are all about the same unless some real problem develops. This illustrates human impatience with situations over which one has no control and the bafflement when progress is denied. “What *are* they doing up there?” is the question when the line doesn’t seem to move forward at all.

You have probably heard about the man who asked God for the gift of patience, stamping his foot and demanding the gift right now. In good time, and in God's time, mean the same thing. If God can be trusted to meet your need, He can be trusted to do it at the right time. In evangelism I have seen many "prospects" driven away by people who came on too strong, too early. There is even a truism for this case among evangelists that says, "There is no use tugging at green fruit, you'll only bruise it."

He who knows all the factors and has the wisdom of eternity, moves at a pace far too slow for most of us mortals. There are exceptions when the time will be right, even as you pray, and the answer to prayer comes so quickly it makes your head spin. Far more common is the encounter of our human impatience with a God who does things in His own way, and in His own time. We need to believe that this is not done to plague us, nor to suit His convenience, but because the time is not yet right.

Probably the hardest example of God's timing for us to accept is that which involves His view of the death of our earthly physical bodies. Many who pray for physical healing are not healed here, but hereafter. In God's timing the difference is momentary. Still, in His compassion He recognizes how hard it is for us to see it that way.

I remember a man who was mortally injured in an auto smash. When he was brought into the emergency room, one eye was hanging down on his cheek. After they had cleaned him up and bandaged many parts of his body, including that empty eye socket, he was put in a hospital room where he lived for some days. His wife knew only that his eye was injured, and asked me to join her in prayer that he would regain the sight of that eye. After the man was dead and buried, I looked back at the whole situation, and from that viewpoint could see several things. In the time between the accident and the man's death, a damaged relationship with his wife was restored. More importantly, he came to a trust relationship with Jesus Christ, and acknowledged him as Lord and Savior. I can picture him now, whole and well, not here, but where all the faithful will one day be, and where he knows, and is known by, many he loves. God knew what was possible for his good in that situation, we did not.

To be still and know that He is God, to rest in God, even though there are grievous situations in our life, is not to cop out, not to abandon responsibility. Resting in God is not so much like resting in bed, doing nothing, as it is like resting in a boat on a broad river, knowing that the current will carry us where we need to go. The right time will come for us to ply the oars, and we can be prayerfully alert for that time. In the meantime we rest peacefully on God's river in the vessel of faith that our devotions have built.

Answers to Prayer

Marjorie

Real prayer is serious business. Sometimes it is even hard work. Sometimes it is unspeakable joy and even gaiety, but we must remember that we address our prayers to Almighty God. The late Kilmer Myers had this to say about God: "God, the mysterious tremendum, whose face no human can see and live, Lord and Judge, whose name we dare not utter, Mighty Potentate, creator of worlds beyond human assessment, God beyond all Gods, who holds every breath we take in His powerful hands, *this* God comes to us in Jesus and in prayer."

With David we can say, as in Psalm 8, "O Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth," and "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Yet we now that He is mindful of us. Indeed He is so mindful that He sent His blessed Son to show us the way, and to be a mediator between Himself and us. Though our prayers may be addressed to Jesus the Son, the Father and the Son are one in the Godhead. While we may feel very close to Jesus, and may talk to him as a friend, we should realize that he is indeed God Himself.

Many people today have somehow missed that sense of awe, and the majesty of Almighty God, in their familiar approach, and sometimes almost flippant prayers. They may have a close relationship with Jesus, and that is good, but the feeling of wonder and awe at the Father God seems to be lacking. The late Dr. Royden Keith Yerkes used to say, "God is that than which there is not thanner." Perhaps we have failed to pass that on.

We believe that God always answers real prayer. By real prayer I mean sincere, fervent, heartfelt prayer. Real prayer comes from the heart, and God knows our hearts. We believe that He always answers, “Yes,” “No,” or “Later.” He never says, “Maybe,” but sometimes He does say, “Wait.” When this happens we are not always aware that He is answering our prayer by saying, “Wait and be patient, for you will see my glory in my own timing, and in the meantime my strength will be sufficient for you.” When we don’t see immediate results we tend to think He has not heard, or that He has turned His face away from us. Oh, we of little faith.

A graphic instance of God’s answering “later” happened in my own life a few years ago, and that answer changed my life. Two events of major importance happened to me about the same time. One was my first beautiful trip to the Holy Land, the other was that I developed a heart problem. The trip to Israel made real something that had been only a beautiful story. My first reaction to the heart trouble was fear and consternation.

I had never spent much time with the Bible. I knew little about it. I was always “going to do that when I had time”—future tense. I was so very busy! Going off in all directions—with no direction—and getting more tired, frustrated and up-tight, doing that “busy work” that we seem to think holds the world together. The trip to Israel gave me a hunger for the Scriptures that I had never had before. The heart problem took care of the lack of time. I soon found that I had lots of time. Not that I was an invalid, I was not, but I had to have rest periods, and cut out much of that extra, meaningless activity.

We are creatures of habit at our house, and up until all of this happened, our morning routine went something like this; my husband got up first and brought a cup of coffee and the newspaper to me in the bed. Then he would go into the study to say his prayers which he does every day. I read the newspaper. It was a very large metropolitan daily and I felt that I could not begin the day until I’d read it practically cover to cover. When “all heaven” broke loose in my life, the first thing to go was the newspaper. I found that I didn’t even miss it. I could have picked up last week’s newspaper and not known the difference. It was all bad news anyway.

Do you know that if you begin the day with the newspaper you take the weight of the world's problems right on your shoulders for all day? It is a terrible way to start the day! But when you begin the day with Jesus Christ, what a difference it makes. Your whole day is different...your attitude is different.

For the newspaper, I substituted my Bible. I'm afraid I had to blow the dust off of it. I began to pray in a much more personal way than I ever had before. (Somehow knowing you have a heart problem, your prayers tend to get a bit more personal.) I soon found that this early morning prayer time went with me into the whole day. I could talk to Jesus no matter what I was doing, and feel that He was there, and that He cared and was listening.

I joined a prayer group with some friends and also a Bible study class. A whole new world opened up for me. My life began to take on new meaning and excitement. In the Bible class I became fascinated with the Old Testament story of the Wilderness Tabernacle, taught by a wonderful woman who had given years of her life to Bible study, and sharing it with others. The participation in the small prayer group made me aware of the love shared by those who have a special bond in Jesus Christ. For the next year I learned and I grew. Oh, how much I learned about myself. My consolation prize was a gift from me to me, a six-volume commentary to help me study the Bible.

My friends, and of course my family, prayed for my healing; and I prayed for my own healing, and I guess we all wondered why nothing seemed to be happening. I wasn't getting any better, but God was answering "later" to our prayers for physical healing. He gave me a wonderful gift of *mental* healing. Fear had always ruled my life, fear of many things, but mostly of people. I was always tongue-tied when meeting people, and felt dreadfully inadequate in groups. Even in school a teacher had called me her "little shrinking violet." My husband says that I was so timid and shy I couldn't stand up and lead silent prayer!

During that year of waiting, the Lord removed a great deal of that fear. I did not pray that it be removed, but He knew what an affliction it was, and that I would not be able to carry on the speaking ministry He was preparing me for, if I was paralyzed with unreasoning

fear. When my life was sufficiently changed, when I was turned around and headed in a new direction, He healed me physically, completely and overnight.

I was to have a coronary angiogram, which is a test to determine if there is any blockage in the heart, and the extent of the damage. Two days before the test was to take place I knew that I was well. I don't know how I knew—there were no thunderbolts or lightning flashes, or voices—I just knew. There was a certainty within myself. I told Bob, and I told my doctor. Of course, I had to have the test anyway.

During the test, as I was watching the TV screen with the doctor, he said, “Marjorie, your heart looks like it was born yesterday.” To which I answered, “Well, it was!” I had a brand-new heart. There was no indication that there had ever been anything wrong with my heart at all. Up to that time the electrocardiograms had shown trouble, now they were fine.

I know that God healed me. I also know that He did not send me the heart problem—I did that to myself—but I know that He used it, for His purposes, and for my good. I don't want to sound like Pollyanna, this is hindsight. A friend once said to me, “We seldom see the face of God, but we often see His back.” How true that is. When we are in the middle of a situation we can't always see the picture of events unfolding around us. When it is over, we can look back and say, “Ah, now I see.”

I learned a vital lesson in all this. No matter what is happening to us, no matter how bad it may seem at the time, we can praise God. He is still God, and as worthy of our praise as ever, no matter what mess we may be in. He can take our situation, transform it, and make something good out of it, if we let Him. Prayer is responding to what God wants to do in our lives.

Doing the Word Individually: Recall an instance in which “later” was God's answer to your prayer. How can you use this to help someone who is impatient about God's answer to their prayer?

Doing the Word in a Group: Let each person in the group share his/her most meaningful prayer experience.

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.