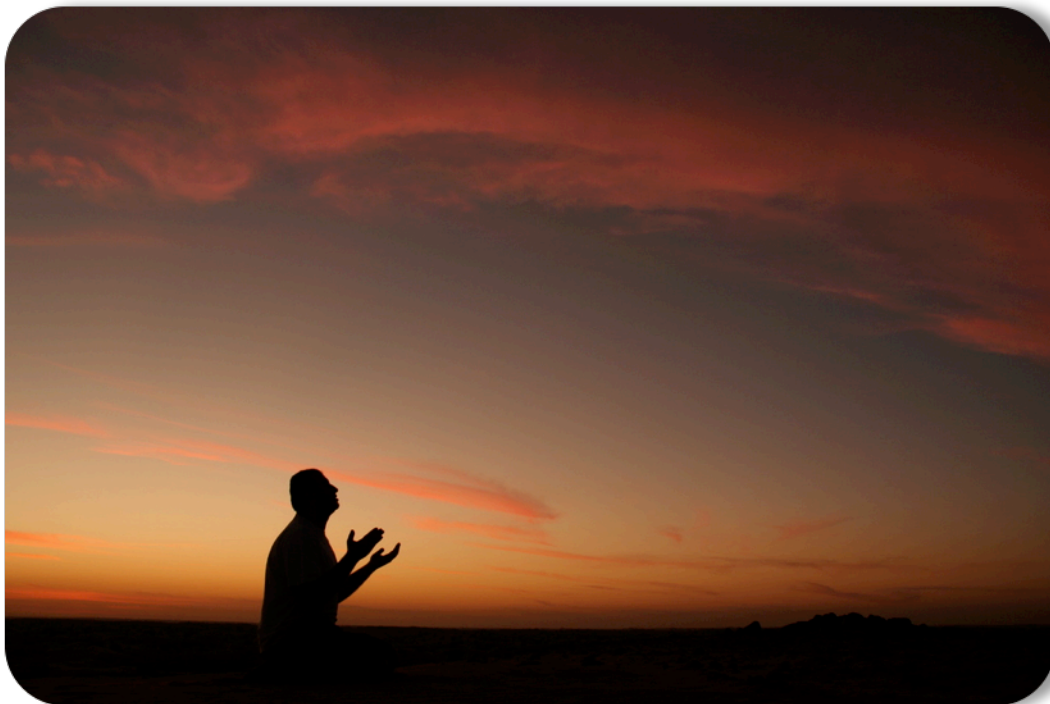


The Practice of Prayer

Parameters of Prayer 4



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe
A ReVision Study

The Practice of Prayer
Parameters of Prayer 4
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Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Practice of Prayer*

Prayer is the most characteristic Christian discipline. But, like any discipline, it must be learned through deliberate, repeated effort.

We can achieve the goal of praying always and in everything, but we'll need to apply ourselves diligently. It will help if we have a good idea of what actually goes into the practice of prayer; and for this, we can look to the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms for guidance.

God has shown us clearly enough how to make the best use of our time in prayer. By focusing on loving Him, our neighbors, and ourselves, and by using the resources He has provided, we can achieve a more consistent and fruitful practice of prayer.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to subscribe to our free instructional newsletters, including *ReVision*, *Scriptorium*, and *The Week*, and *Crosfjgell*, featuring insights from Scripture and our Celtic Christian forebears.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Faithfulness

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. Daniel 6.10

The promise of prayer

Prayer is the most characteristic Christian practice. Prayer opens to us the privilege of continuous communion with the eternal God, in Whose presence we discover mercy and grace to help in our time of need. Since we are never without need of *mercy*, given our inveterate sinfulness and our ungrateful ways, and since apart from the *grace* of the Lord, we can do nothing, Christians know that their best interests are served, and their greatest hopes and joys are realized, in the presence of God in prayer.

Of course, we cannot all give ourselves up to a life of perpetual prayer *and nothing else*. Someone has to make the coffee, raise the kids, keep the lawn looking nice, bring home the bacon, and the zillion and one other tasks and duties that make up our everyday lives. But prayer is the kind of discipline that we don't always have to be going *to* – like a gym or a particular piece of workout equipment – in order to participate *in* it. Prayer is a discipline that goes *with* us, like a song, or like breathing, observing our environment, or feeling the warmth of the sun. Prayer is essential, delightful, and wondrous even though at times it can be lonely, difficult, and agonizingly unfruitful.

But we cannot do *without* it. So we take seriously the teaching of Scripture to pray always and in everything, so that, increasingly, prayer can have primacy of place in our lives. We submit to those preconditions of prayer which, as we meet them, help to ensure that our prayers will realize the promise of mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

So when we actually enter into prayer, how should that go? What does the *work* of prayer entail, so that we may gain the maximum benefit from the *discipline* of it?

Like much else in life, we improve our use of prayer by practice – by faithfully coming to the Lord in prayer, seeking His face, pressing near to His presence, opening our souls to His inspection, and resting in the promise of His unfailing mercy and grace. But, as you may remember from your days in sports, or learning to play the piano, we don't always *feel* like practicing. We practice because we *need* to, not because we *feel* like it. Just so, the work of prayer begins in *faithfulness*, not in *feeling*.

Resolve, not feelings

You will not always *feel* like praying. You will be too tired to pray, too sad, too distracted, too unbelieving, or just too content doing whatever else you're doing. So in order to gain the *promise* of prayer, of mercy and grace to help in your time of need – which is always and in everything – you'll need to rely on something other than your *feelings* to help you engage in the discipline of prayer.

This is why it's so important to settle it in your *mind* that prayer matters, that it must be the defining discipline of the life of faith. You will never be in your walk with Lord more than what you are in your time with Him. If your time with Him in prayer, and in His Word, is minimal, formalistic, dutiful, and dull, your Christian life will look pretty much the same.

So you need to make up your mind concerning the primacy of prayer, then anchor that idea into the firm footing of your conscience, so that you *know* and are *convinced* of the importance of prayer, of praying always

and in everything, and you will not allow your *feelings* to tell you otherwise, ever.

Helps

I doubt Daniel felt much like praying when he heard that the king had put a ban on prayer, except as he permitted. But Daniel was resolved to pray. He prayed three times a day, always in the same place, although it's likely the contents of his prayer differed from one time to the next.

So though he may not have *felt* like praying, Daniel had *committed* to meeting the Lord three times a day. Therefore, in his mind, he was able to overcome whatever hesitant feelings he may have had and keep his time with the Lord in prayer.

If we want to pray like Daniel, we'll need to *plan our prayer times* daily – morning, evening, and noon perhaps. Make up your mind to keep those times of prayer, and make sure you always bring something with you to them. Be attentive to the Lord's presence throughout the day, and respond as often as you can with some word of acknowledgement, thanks, or praise.

Find a [prayer partner](#) or two to pray with you, perhaps once a week. Daniel and his three friends provided powerful spiritual support for one another through their prayers together, as we see in Daniel 2. Prayer partners can hold us up before the Lord throughout the week and join us in seeking Him on a regular basis. Having a prayer partner or two can greatly enhance your ability to remain faithful in the work of prayer.

Finally, make the most of the times for prayer provided by your church's service of worship. Sadly these days, our times for worship contain fewer and fewer opportunities for prayer. However, when you *are* praying in worship, whether in formal or silent prayer or as you are singing to the Lord, throw yourself into the work of prayer wholeheartedly, focusing on the Lord and paying attention to all the words.

If we can strengthen our *resolve* to pray, the faithfulness we need for gaining the promise of prayer will enable us to discover in the practice of prayer that continuous presence of the Lord for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, and for mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose you sometimes don't feel like praying? How should we try to deal with such feelings?
2. Would you say that you follow a prayer plan? Would it be a good idea to do so? Explain.
3. What's one thing you could do to firm up your *resolve* to pray more consistently?

Next steps – Demonstration: Find someone who will agree to be a prayer partner with you. Download the Soul Friends brochure ([click here](#)) and make a copy for your prayer partner.

2 In This Manner: Loving God

“In this manner, therefore, pray:

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name...

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” Matthew 6.9, 13

A simple guide to prayer

OK, we’re firming up our resolve to pray. We’re going to work at prayer so that, increasingly, it has the primacy of place in our lives, we are always praying, and praying in everything, conscious of the Lord and maintaining communion with Him, whatever we’re doing.

We’ll need additional help to organize our thoughts as we practice prayer without ceasing. The Lord’s teaching, in what we refer to as the Lord’s Prayer, is the best place to look for simple, concise guidance in how we should come before the Lord in prayer.

Because we’ve already dealt with confession of sin (v. 12) in a previous installment, I won’t say anything more about that here, except to remind us that whenever we come to prayer, we need *mercy*, and we will find mercy as we admit our need for it, confessing our sins to the Lord. We don’t necessarily need to *begin* every prayer with confession; however, we need to keep short accounts with the Lord in this matter. So whenever He piques or prods us concerning some matter, and as we seek the Lord for mercy, let us always pause to confess our sins and seek the filling of the Spirit, before we get too far along in our prayers.

Praise the Lord

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to give praise to God the Father in heaven. We *hallow* the Lord by setting Him apart, as He is indeed set apart, because of His intrinsic being and greatness, and because of the variety and majesty of His works. Our prayers should always include praise for some aspect of God and His work. By praising the Lord in all our prayers, we set Him apart as the focus, not only of our prayers, but of every moment of our lives.

But *how* do we praise God? To listen to some believers praying, we might think that praising the Lord involves something like saying, “Lord, we really just praise You.”

But that phrase, and others like it, are so overused as to be almost devoid of any real power or meaning. To *praise* God is to enumerate His many singular qualities, to remark His greatness, beauty, wisdom, kindness, compassion, provision, love, goodness, power, and so forth, as we read of these in His Word or observe them in the world. Each of these terms invites us to pause and reflect more deeply: What makes God beautiful? How has He shown you His wisdom? What specific act of goodness, kindness, or compassion have you seen Him work?

The more we praise God, and the more thoughtful our praises of Him are, the more we are lifted into His presence, so that we encounter Him in His glory. This draws out even more praise from us, and sometimes praise so unspeakable that all we *can* say is, “I praise You, Lord, I praise You!”

Praising God in this way will help us to be more alert to the evidence of God’s presence and power all around us all day long. This, in turn, will help to offer us more opportunities for praising the Lord throughout the day, whenever we observe, experience, or express some aspect of the character or work of God. The more we praise the Lord, the more we will find our admiration, adoration, and love for Him growing; and this, in turn,

will make us eager to know His presence with us always, in every situation, every moment of our lives.

Give thanks to the Lord

Closely associated with the work of praising God is that of giving thanks. Begin by giving thanks for God Himself – for the Father, Who made you, the Son, Who saved you, and the Spirit, who keeps and shapes you. Then give thanks for the gift of life, salvation, and the Kingdom and glory of God, to which He daily calls you, and which He urges and aids you to enter more deeply. Give thanks to God for the many gifts He bestows upon you each day – time, breath, life, work, family, friends, and the world you see all around you. Remember that He gives these blessings every day, and not just once. Keeping this mind should help to make it more likely that we will give thanks in everything, and that, increasingly, giving thanks will become the kind of people we are – grateful, not grumbling.

Throughout the day we will receive cues and prompts from the Lord, which can serve to call forth words of praise and thanks, if only within ourselves. Every good and perfect gift comes down from God – a friendly greeting, a project finished on time, the beauty of the day, the wonders of culture, protection from harm, strength when you feel weak, a welcome meal or conversation, *every* good and perfect gift – so we should be ready with a word of praise and thanks as we recognize all the blessings God brings to us.

We love God because of Who He is and what He does. He is holy and loving and kind, and His works are full of blessing for those who know Him. Make sure to include in your prayers ample, specific, heartfelt praise and thanks to God. You can never exhaust gratitude or praise, and you never want to offer such prayers in a merely perfunctory manner. Set your mind on God, and let your heart range over His many gifts.

Then hallow our Father in heaven by pouring out prayers of praise and thanks to Him, every time you pray.

For reflection

1. How much do praise and thanksgiving occupy your time in prayer at present?
2. What could you do to be more alert to and mindful of the many ways God blesses you each day?
3. Suggest some ways you might use Scripture to guide you in praising God.

Next steps – Transformation: Begin to add more praise and thanks to your prayers, and to take more opportunities to praise and thank the Lord throughout the day.

3 In This Manner: Loving Others

*“Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.”* Matthew 6.10-13

Us, *that is*

We don’t get very deep into the Lord’s Prayer until we are reminded that *all* our prayers should be, first, about God and His greatness and mighty works, and then about our neighbors.

Notice that Jesus taught us to pray, “Give *us* this day...” *Us*, not *me*. While *us* certainly includes *me*, it’s a good idea, following Paul’s instruction to put others first (Phil. 2.4-11), to intercede for others before we begin supplicating the Lord for our own needs. When we come to prayer, having confessed our sins and given abundant praise and thanks to God, I think it’s a good idea *not* to allow ourselves to become the centerpiece of our prayers. We’ll get to the grace we need soon enough. Jesus taught us to pray for others, and praying for others is one of the most important things we can do to show our neighbors the kind of love we’d like for ourselves.

The “daily bread” your neighbor needs – your spouse and children, neighbors, co-workers, prayer partners, all kinds of people – will be in some ways similar and in some ways different from your own needs. You can use general prayers to focus on the people in your [Personal Mission Field](#), and you can pause over each person for whom you pray, listening for the Spirit to bring to mind some *specific* need each one might have.

Praying for lost people

Some of the people you see and spend time with each week will be unbelievers. They don’t know the Lord, but He loves them nonetheless. He wants us to love them, too, and we can nurture His love for them in us by bringing their needs to the Lord in prayer.

Think about the unsaved people you’re likely to see during any given day. Thank God for putting them in your life. Pray for their *general* daily needs, and that God might even use meeting those needs to remind them of His love and care for them. Every unbelieving person knows God (Rom. 1.18-21). Most unbelievers don’t like to think about Him, and some even work hard to suppress any thought of God whatsoever. But He’s always at work on their behalf, always revealing Himself around them, and always available for them to catch a glimpse of Him. Pray for the lost people in your life, that something from their environment (you?) might strum a chord of the image of God in which they’ve been made, perhaps leaving them a little more open to the Lord than before.

Pray also that the Spirit of God would woo your lost friends and acquaintances, as they wonder at something beautiful in the environment, some act of kindness on your part, or some particularly good gift or situation that comes their way. Pray for opportunities to show them the kindness of the Lord, to initiate a conversation that might lead to talking about spiritual matters, or even to share some word of witness or testimony with them.

We need to pray for lost people, because praying for them will help us to love them more, prepare us to talk

with them about the Lord, and perhaps move the Spirit of God to make them open to the Good News about Jesus.

Praying for believers

Each of us will have plenty of believers in our Personal Mission Field as well. As you pray during the morning watch, think ahead to the Christians you'll have contact with during the day. Pray in general for their daily needs, and specifically about the needs of each one, as you are aware of those.

Three things to pray for each believer in your life, as well as for all believers generally, are (1) their sanctification, (2) the situations in which they find themselves each day, and (3) the service they minister to the people around them. Use Scripture to guide you in praying that your fellow believers will continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18), that they will keep focused on Jesus as they go through their daily situations (Heb. 12.1, 2), and that God will equip them from His Word for those good works of service and ministry that will find them working their own Personal Mission Field (2 Tim. 3.15-17). Pray that the Lord will keep them from the evil one, and help them in seeking and advancing His Kingdom. Take the time to mention to your Christian friends that you pray for them, and encourage them to share particular prayer requests with you. Be sure to pray for those requests, and to follow-up as appropriate.

During your time of intercession, remember to pray for public officials (1 Tim. 2.1-8), the persecuted Church and believers and ministries around the world, and for the progress of Christ's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Stake out a broad horizon for your prayers of intercession, asking the Lord to shower His grace into the lives of those you are called to serve, and throughout the world.

For reflection

1. What is your present approach to interceding for others in prayer? Has this article given you any new ideas?
2. Why is it especially important to pray for those in your Personal Mission Field?
3. How could you spread your prayers of intercession for others throughout the day, in order to help in hanging your day on prayer?

Next steps – Transformation: What can you do to make your prayers of intercession more specific and more a part of your prayers throughout the day? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

4 In This Manner: Loving Yourself

*“Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.”* Matthew 6.10-13

Love yourself in prayer: It’s OK!

Obviously, a good portion of the time we spend in prayer is going to be devoted to seeking mercy and grace to help in *our* times of need. We need the Lord to come to *our* aid and defense, as well as our neighbors’. We love ourselves properly when we entrust our lives into the Lord’s hands for forgiveness of sin and repentance, for all our daily needs, our relationships with others, the trials and temptations we expect to face, and our work in seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God. Whatever in general we pray for others, we should pray for ourselves as well.

But it’s likely we’ll focus more time and attention on our own needs than on the needs of others, if only because we are more aware of our needs, and are more personally invested in them. Praying for our own needs can sometimes seem a little self-serving. But if we remember that what we may expect from the Lord concerning all our requests is mercy and grace, then this will allow us to maintain a proper attitude of humility and a focus on exalting the Lord and serving others as we bring our requests before the throne of grace.

Let’s take a look at one psalm that can guide us in supplicating the Lord for our own needs.

Psalm 142

In our final installment of this series I’ll have more to say about using the psalms to guide us in prayer. For now, I want to look more closely at one psalm which I find particularly helpful in bringing my own personal requests to the Lord.

Psalm 142 offers us a good template for guiding us as we seek mercy and grace to help in our times of need. Let’s note the following:

First, David indicates that he prayed out loud (vv. 1, 2), and with a kind of urgency that he describes as *crying out*. It’s not always necessary to pray aloud, but we should not hesitate to do so when we can. I find praying out loud makes me more thoughtful, helps me to keep focused, blocks out distractions, and in general makes my time in prayer more truly conversational. Try including at least some out loud praying during your times before the throne of grace.

Next, we note that David refers to his prayer as a *complaint* (v. 2). His prayer is the appeal of one who is in some kind of *trouble*. Again, there seems to be a sense of urgency about these words. David was feeling desperate, and he didn’t hesitate to express his feelings to the Lord, as though somehow he shouldn’t come to the Lord complaining about this, that, or the other. David *poured out* his complaint to the Lord – *all* his feelings of fear, frustration, and need. He felt *overwhelmed* by whatever it was he was facing (v. 3); yet he appears to have taken comfort in the fact that God already knew about the situation, even before he started to pray (v. 3). We can almost hear David’s sigh of relief as he prays, “Then you knew my path.” That sense of

relief could only have come to David after he'd been completely honest about his desperation.

In verses 3 and 4, David puts the problem before the Lord. He is threatened by adversaries who do not have his best interests in mind, and who seem to be coming at him from every angle. No one cares about his situation, and nobody can help him through it. David was probably trying to get away from Saul at this time, as the superscription to Psalm 142 advises us that he was hiding in a cave. He could see no way of escape from his trial, and no one was available to help him.

So David took refuge in the Lord (v. 5). It's all he could do. He didn't prescribe what he thought God should do. He simply declared his trust in the Lord, saying that God was his refuge and portion. As long as he could know the Lord's presence with him, and be assured of resting in his favor, he could bear up under whatever trial might come his way. At this point in his life, David was no match for Saul and his army (v. 6), but he was not about to allow *temporal situations* to ensnare his soul and rob him of his joy. David knew to focus on three things in this situation, three requests that he was quite certain God would grant (v. 7): Give him grace to *praise the Lord*, grant that he might *know more of the righteousness of God*, and enable him to *trust the Lord to do what would bountifully bless him*, regardless of how his adversity might conclude.

Summary observations

So what can we learn from this psalm about bringing our personal needs before the Lord, loving ourselves in the same way we love our neighbors? Three things:

First, when you come to the Lord for yourself, be honest and open about your faults, feelings, frailties, fears, and frustrations. Don't think you have to put on some kind of "game face" to come before the Lord. He already knows where you are, and he invites you to be yourself as you seek His mercy and grace.

Second, don't presume on the Lord by prescribing how He should answer your prayers. He may intend for you to know His grace in some way entirely other than what you're hoping. Lay out your needs before Him, being as specific as you can, then express your determination to rest in Him, to seek in *Him* the grace you need, and to wait on Him to supply that grace in whatever form He deems best.

Finally, strive to grow through your time of prayer by including praise to God, regardless of the occasion of your prayer; by seeking specific growth in the Kingdom and righteousness of Jesus Christ; and by looking forward with peace and joy to however God plans to supply His grace for your time of need. David entered Psalm 142 in fear and trepidation, but he concluded it with confidence, praise, and hope. All our prayers for all our needs can be a similar journey of trust and growth, if we will be honest, patient, and faithful in seeking the Lord as David sought Him in Psalm 142.

For reflection

1. What does it mean for you to be honest in prayer before the Lord?
2. What does it mean for you to make God your refuge, especially when you're faced with pressing needs?
3. Why is it a good idea to end our prayers for ourselves with praise, an eye to growth, and expressions of hope and trust?

Next steps – Transformation: What can you learn from Psalm 142 to improve your prayers for your own needs? Begin incorporating those lessons into your times of prayer right away.

5 Waiting on the Lord

I would have lost heart, *unless I had believed*
That I would see the goodness of the LORD
In the land of the living.
Wait on the LORD;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the LORD! Psalm 27.13, 14

An impatient generation

Let's face it: Patience is not one of our strong suits. Everything in our culture is in a hurry. We expect things to get done right away, and we get irritated and impatient whenever we have to wait, whether it's in line at the DMV, or for that promotion we've been expecting, or for our children to clean up their rooms on their own initiative.

We are not a people known for patience.

What better way to learn patience, therefore, than by *practicing* it in prayer? We can't dictate to the Lord. He doesn't operate on our schedule or agenda. He knows better than we do what we really need, and how best to fulfill that need. And He finds it useful and for our good for us *not* to know specifically what He has in mind at every moment.

Waiting on the Lord in prayer helps us to rest in Him and His good and perfect will. Waiting on the Lord in prayer can be a means to humble us, as well as a catalyst to lead us to rejoice. And it also works faith in us, who long to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. What does this mean, to *wait* on the Lord in prayer?

Waiting in silence

In the first instance, waiting on the Lord means waiting *in silence* for the Lord to *ready your soul* for prayer. I mentioned earlier in this series that the throne room of heaven is a place of great holy and spiritual din. A lot is going on around the throne of grace, where you have come to find mercy and grace to help in your time of need. It is important, as we come into prayer, and as we continue in it, to be mindful of our surroundings.

After all, this is not the sort of thing we see every day. Although [it could be](#).

In silence, let your mind survey the throne room of the Lord, reflecting on those many passages of Scripture that offer us a glimpse of that holy place. See with the eye of faith and understanding the myriads of angels and saints surrounding the throne. Listen to hear their praises. Smell the fragrances emanating from the Lord's garment. Absorb the radiant glory of the place – its splendor, brilliance, majesty, and enormity. Let the *nature and inhabitants* of the throne room of the Lord set your heart right for prayer as you not only *enter* prayer in silence, but as you *return* to such silent contemplation at various times during your prayers.

Against the backdrop of that glorious landscape, and in the presence of those glorious beings, you will certainly be more attuned to your need for *mercy*. And, as you recognize that, by the Spirit of God and in the Name of Jesus, *you belong in this place by birthright*, you will delight and rejoice and be at peace there along with everyone else who belongs there, and thus find the grace *there* which can lead to praise and hope as your time for prayer comes to an end.

But you must be willing to wait in silence, listening as the Spirit escorts you into that venue He so variously and wondrously describes in His Word, and as the Lord Jesus receives you to sit with Him and make your requests known to God (Eph. 2.6). Wait in silence to take it all in, and to listen for the Spirit to prompt you with words beyond uttering to prepare to meet the Father in prayer.

Persevering in prayer

Waiting in prayer also requires that we be willing to *persevere* in prayer, both during the time we're actually praying, and for the things we most earnestly seek from the Lord.

Jesus taught that persistence in prayer is a key to gaining the mercy and grace we require (cf. Matt. 7.7-11; Lk. 11.5-13; Lk. 18.1-8). It is more likely that *we* will grow tired of making our requests to the Lord before *the Lord* will tire of hearing them. Indeed, the Lord calls us to give Him no rest and to take no rest ourselves, until He pours out His blessings in and through His people once again (Is. 62.6, 7).

As we persist in prayer, we demonstrate and grow in faith in various ways, first, by showing that we trust the Lord concerning the *reliability of His Word*; second, by demonstrating confidence in the *efficacy of prayer* as the means whereby to realize mercy and grace we need; and third, by indicating our confidence in God's willingness to *hear* and *answer* our prayers, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Waiting on the Lord through persisting in prayer thus strengthens our faith in the Lord as we wait on Him to bring forth His goodness in our lives, in His way and His time.

The practice of prayer will always be incomplete without significant periods of waiting on the Lord, both in the *silence* of prayer, as well as in the *importunacy* of it.

For reflection

1. At this time, how much does *waiting* on the Lord factor into your prayers? In what ways?
2. How can you see that waiting on the Lord in silence will help you to realize mercy and grace from the Lord *while you are present with Him in prayer*?
3. Paul gave up praying about a certain matter at one point (2 Cor. 12.7-10). Or at least, he changed the way he prayed about the matter. How can we tell when one of our prayers may have arrived at such a state?

Next steps – Preparation: Where could you turn in Scripture to gain a better understanding of the landscape of the throne room of grace? How will you incorporate what you see there in your time of waiting on the Lord in prayer?

6 Sing to the Lord

*Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples.
For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before Him;
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.* Psalm 96.1-6

Singing as prayer

It's too easy to overlook the role of singing in the life of faith, and in particular, as a means of prayer. Most Christians don't sing unless they're in the company of other believers during worship. And even then they don't sing like they mean it. Singing is just this thing Christians do. We put up with singing, but singing isn't really an integral part of our walk with or work for the Lord. If someone passed a law against singing to the Lord in any context other than worship, most of us wouldn't have to change our behavior one bit.

Many of the psalms, however, combine singing and prayer into one discipline. Some were written to familiar folk tunes, both so they could be used in worship and be remembered and sung during everyday activities. Paul and Silas appear to have been singing a psalm in the dungeon of that Philippian prison. Jesus and His disciples sang as they left the upper room and headed to the garden, where Jesus would be arrested.

Singing is clearly a form a prayer in the Scriptures, and it is not intended as a discipline to be engaged only during services of worship. One way to enrich your prayer life and to bring more prayer into your daily activities is to include singing to the Lord as part of your practice of prayer. Singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is an evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit, Who teaches us to pray because we don't know how to pray as we ought (Eph. 5.18-21).

So if it pleases the Spirit to use songs to teach us to pray, it should please us, in seeking to improve our prayers, to include singing to the Lord as part of our practice of prayer.

The benefits of singing

I suppose there are many reasons why people don't sing any more than they do. They think they don't have a good voice. They can't carry a tune. Don't know all the words. Just don't think about it much. Whatever.

But there are some very good reasons *to* sing, and most people are not aware of these. Or if they are, they don't credit them very much.

But consider: Singing is an excellent way of embedding important matters in your long-term memory. When God wanted the people of Israel to remember all the important details of His love for them, His salvation, their corruption, His discipline and promises, and the broad scope of His covenant, He instructed Moses to write a song, and all the people to learn it (Deut. 31, 32).

Singing can be useful in helping to gain a clear and compelling, long-term vision of God's faithfulness and

greatness (cf. Pss. 68, 104, 126, etc.).

Singing exercises all three of the components of the soul: With the *mind* we recall words and the images associated with them; with the *heart* we experience the mood or affection of any particular song; and with the *conscience* we preserve singing as an important part of the life of prayer. In addition, singing exercises our bodily strength and engages words and melodies to declare our faith and hope.

Singing can lift us up and carry us above untoward circumstances or conditions, as Paul and Silas understood. Singing reinforces our calling to obey God, Who commands us over and over in His Word to sing songs of praise and thanks to Him. Singing during the daily moments of our lives can train us to sing more robustly and sincerely when we gather together for public worship.

Some guidelines

So how can you make singing more a part of your life of prayer with the Lord? A few brief suggestions: First, learn to sing psalms or hymns or spiritual songs that are in the form of prayers. Then include one of these as part of your prayers every day.

Second, commit to learning all the stanzas of a prayer song by heart. Write them down and practice singing them throughout the day, tuning your heart for prayer and paying careful attention to the words as you sing, so that your singing becomes part of your prayer life during the day.

Finally, sing whenever you have the opportunity and are alone – as when you’re driving your car, getting ready for the day, taking a walk, doing the lawn, or simply by yourself at home. The more you sing, especially when you use singing as a way of coming before the Lord in prayer, the more you will stretch your prayer life into your entire day, and discover the pleasure and power of prayer in one of its most important expressions.

For reflection

1. How much does singing to the Lord factor into your walk with the Lord at this time? How important would you say singing to the Lord is to you?
2. How important does singing to the Lord seem to be to the *Lord*? Explain.
3. Where will you start to begin making singing more a consistent and important part of your life of prayer?

Next steps – Transformation: At our website, [subscribe to Crosfigell](#), our thrice-weekly devotional newsletter. Each issue contains an excerpt for singing from the psalms, using familiar hymn tunes. Here’s an excellent way to begin singing to the Lord.

7 Prayers for Every Occasion

Moreover King Hezekiah and the leaders commanded the Levites to sing praise to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the singer. So they sang praises with gladness and they bowed their heads and worshiped. 2 Chronicles 29:30

A ready resource

Early in this series on *The Parameters of Prayer*, we saw that, when they needed words at a critical moment to guide them in prayer, the first Christians turned to the psalms. They were neither the first nor the last to do so. Hezekiah recognized the value of the psalms in rallying the people back to God. We recall that the Levites were scattered throughout all the territory of Israel. Hezekiah's instruction would have been taken back to every city, where the Levites instructed and led the people in seeking the Lord using His own words from the psalms.

Other prayers and Scripture also include or depend on words and themes first expressed in the psalms. The psalms were given as a resource to assist us in prayer, and God's people throughout the ages have found them useful to that end.

There's no reason why we shouldn't make better use of the psalms as we work to bolster our own practice of prayer.

Some suggestions

In my book, [*God's Prayer Program*](#), I explain why praying the psalms is so helpful, and how we can learn to pray them as our own words. Let me summarize a few of the points I make there.

First, it's important to become familiar with the psalms by reading them over and over. I recommend, if you're thinking about learning to pray the psalms, that you add a daily reading in the psalms to your time with the Lord, and that in two ways. First, read and meditate on one psalm per day. Try to experience the mood of the psalm (jubilant? fearful? anxious? urgent?), and to summarize one or two of its main ideas. Make a note on these matters in the margin of your Bible, so that you'll be reminded of them next time through.

Then, second, read a section of Psalm 119 as preparation for your time in the Word of God. Psalm 119 consists of 22 sections, each comprised of 8 verses, and almost all of it is in the form of a prayer concerning the Word (Law, precepts, testimony, rules, etc.) of God. Here's a good place to begin in learning to pray the psalms, because you can pray these sections of Psalm 119 practically *verbatim*, word-for-word, making only a few adjustments as needed.

As you learn to pray Psalm 119, apply what you're learning there to praying parts of the psalm you're reading for the day. Where you can pray word-for-word, go ahead and do so. Latch onto those ideas or images in your daily psalm that seem especially appropriate or relevant to you. Turn them into your own words and pray them back to the Lord, keeping in mind as you do the larger context in which these words appear in the psalm.

Now you're off and running, praying part of Psalm 119 and using what you learn there to begin praying parts of other psalms as you are able each day.

Next, look for some psalms which you think you could easily adapt to your own circumstances, or which you could pray as a general guide for your daily life over and over. When I began praying the psalms, Psalm 8 worked this way for me. The first part got me focused on God and His glory, and encouraged me to seek the

glory which God is continually revealing in created things. This, in turn, led me to be more alert and responsive to God throughout the day. The second part led me into prayers of gratitude for my salvation, knowing that it's only by the grace of God that I know and enjoy Him at all. The final section drew me into praying about the work God has given me to do, and how all my work fits into the overall divine economy in which Jesus is reconciling the world back to God. Then a final word of praise, looping back to the beginning and tying the entire psalm together. It seemed like every time I prayed my way through this psalm it was a different experience, but always covering the same terrain. Sometimes I prayed Psalm 8 verbatim. At other times I would paraphrase, or try re-phrasing the words of the psalm in my own words. At other times I'd use the different sections of the psalm as a kind of springboard into related topics, praying for friends, family, and co-workers, asking the Lord to make Himself known to lost neighbors, or seeking Him for a clearer vision of the Kingdom in its coming.

As you learn to use a familiar psalm to exercise your prayer muscles before the Lord, it will be easy to translate what you learn in *that* psalm to others as well, until, with time, you begin using *all* the psalms in your prayers at one time or another.

Always new

Praying through the psalms provides a rich experience of meeting the Lord in new ways on familiar turf. If you'll take this discipline seriously, and work at it consistently, you'll find that you never grow tired of praying the psalms, and that all the things Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer are given ample space and fodder to carry your prayers deeper, longer, and with greater joy and satisfaction.

As you grow in your practice of prayer, make room for praying the psalms. And keep making room for them until, in the words of one ancient Irish saint, you make the words of the psalms your own words, and the prayers God has written for you, the backbone of your practice of prayer.

For reflection

1. What is your favorite psalm? Why? Do you think you could learn to pray this psalm? How?
2. How would you expect learning to pray the psalms might help your practice of prayer?
3. What obstacles do you anticipate in thinking about learning to pray the psalms? Could another believer help you to overcome these?

Next steps – Transformation: Choose one psalm to pray every day for the next week. Write it out, so that you have it with you always, and can work through part of it during the day. At the end of that week, wait on the Lord in prayer to see what you've learned about prayer and praying the psalms through this exercise.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are the biggest obstacles currently standing in the way of you improving your practice of prayer? How might a prayer partner or soul friend help you in dealing with these?
2. How would you describe your vision of the throne room of the Lord at this time? What can you do to make that vision clearer and more compelling?
3. What steps are you taking to bring more prayer into your day – not just at the beginning and end, but throughout your day?
4. What's the most important lesson about prayer you've learned from these studies?
5. How are you putting that lesson to work in your practice of prayer?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.