

CHAPTER 1

P Prayer Is a Relationship

MOST OF US have lives that are busy, busy, busy. Our schedules are “filled to the gills” even with overlapping appointments. With so many demands upon our time, our attention, and our energies, it is often difficult to focus on and invest quality time in significant relationships: relationships with our family, our relationships within our church, and our relationship with God. Sadly, these significant relationships are treated as if they were fast-food meals. We drive up to the window, place our order, and speed away to that urgent meeting.

A pastor relates this story: “A dear friend of mine who has cancer told me that this was the best thing that had ever happened to him. It stopped him short in the race of life and caused him to reevaluate everything, starting with his relationship with God.” Illness and other major events may also bring us to a crisis point, urging us, with new seriousness, to depend upon the Lord. For some it may be a death in the family. For others it may be a major “passage” in life, a conflict in marriage, trouble with children, or a business reversal. These emotional earthquakes will break down our defenses and open us up to the Lord. What we often find then is a deep inner emptiness and a longing for God. Psalms 63 and 73 are a witness to that longing and its satisfaction.

A Love Relationship

Imagine yourself deeply, wholeheartedly in love. Love flows from deep inside you, through every part of your being. That love automatically expresses itself in many ways: in words of love, in expressions of praise and appreciation, in natural joy, in a silent glow of satisfaction. At various moments day and night you think about that one you love so much. You trust this one more and more and want to share every aspect of life with this person.

That is the relationship God wants to have with us. He is an ardent lover, driven by a soul-deep love that never cools off. God described himself to Moses as “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). He is tender, expressive. He showers us with beautiful words and wonderful gifts. He woos our attention and trust.

Prayer is communication between two who love each other, between God and us. It builds the trust that gradually intertwines our lives wholly with Him. And it has a love-deep effect on us, as it did Moses. “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord” (Exodus 34:29).

That is what God wants prayer to be. He desires communication with us that is open, deep, and constant. And as we turn to Him, He will work in us to develop the kind of prayer life that makes us glow with the glory of His love.

Prayer Is Reaching Out to God

When my wife and I are talking, she doesn't appreciate it when my mind and heart are preoccupied. If my eyes are looking elsewhere, if I answer her with a grunt or with “Yeah . . . OK,” that's not conversation. She's insulted. She wants me to look at her, listen to her, and respond openly and thoughtfully.

God is no different. If my wife can tell when our conversa-

tion is a shallow pretense, can't God as well? We miss the depth of conversation that is possible through prayer when our prayer consists of mere words, spoken from obligation or dry routine.

Prayer is when we reach out to God from our hearts. It starts with our need for Him. We are thirsty for Him, as one gets thirsty for water "in a dry and weary land" (Psalm 63:1).

Notice the passionate and intense verbs that are used to describe the psalmist's desire for God in Psalm 63. The psalmist *seeks* for God, *thirsts* and *longs* for Him, and *looks* to see Him. These verbs are not passive. These are passion-filled verbs that indicate an intense desire to meet with God.

David describes his experience of longing for God in verse 1 with the strong physical metaphor of being thirsty in a desert with no sign of water. Physical thirst is used as a symbol of spiritual longing. Both are caused by a keenly felt need. Both, if not quenched, can lead to death.

This metaphor is truly an extraordinary image in the Old Testament world. It is hard to imagine an ancient Greek philosopher thirsting for the ego-consumed god Zeus. It is unthinkable that a contemporary Canaanite could thirst for the bloodthirsty god Baal. Yet David longs for his thirst-quenching God.

God puts within us a restlessness, a neediness, a thirst for Him. But too often we respond to that need in other ways. We get anxious. We reach out for more and more money. We try to pacify ourselves with entertainment. We sooth our restlessness with the temporary thrill of buying something new.

But nothing less than God himself will ever satisfy us. God wants us to thirst for Him. That thirst should drive our prayer, our Bible reading, and yes, our church attendance. If we don't come to these means of grace with a thirst for God, we won't receive much from them.

By this thirst metaphor, the psalmist is expressing devotional commitment to the Lord. The Lord has surely been at work in his life; this divine activity is the basis for the psalmist's devotion. This devotion may be called a "purity of heart."

“Purity of heart is to will one thing, the love of God,” the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, said. It is an undiluted devotion for God that answers His free choice of us.

Prayer Is Fed by a Vision of God

Have you ever had a vision of God? I’m not talking about a physical vision that people see with their eyes or in a dream. I’m talking about a deep, personal realization of who God is, how great He is, and His immediate presence with us.

The writer of Psalm 63 had a glorious vision (v. 2). He went to the Temple and saw again God’s glory, His power, and His wonderful presence with us.

The same thing happened to the writer of Psalm 73. The psalmist looks at the wicked. They never seem to have any trouble. They live as they please, ignoring God, and getting richer and richer. Life for them is a breeze.

The psalmist got envious, bitter. But then he went to the Temple, and his perspective changed. He realized that God’s personal presence is life’s essence and its greatest gift. Those who enjoy His presence have everything. They hold His hand throughout this life (v. 23). Afterward, they spend eternity with Him (v. 24). They need nothing else on earth or in heaven (v. 25). Those who have rejected God’s presence have nothing and have doomed themselves to death (v. 27).

Our prayer life is fed and nourished by such visions of God, but these don’t need to be rare events. As we turn to God in prayer, as we learn of Him in the Scriptures, as we experience Him in the Body of Believers, we get a new vision of Him. We realize He is here with us. Knowing He is present, prayer becomes a natural response to Him.

Prayer Is a Response of Praise

When I try to praise God out of obligation, because I “ought to,” the words seem empty and forced. However, when I turn to Him, remembering He is with me, praise becomes the natural language of love.

I praise Him with words, spoken from my heart (63:3). I

praise Him with songs (v. 5). I want to praise Him forever (v. 4). I want to show Him I love Him by serving Him.

And I find myself not only loving God more and more, but loving those around me as well.

God is so great, so good. And praise is a natural response to standing in His presence.

David's worship is based on God's love, which is a greater good than life itself. This love is His grace, His covenant-love, which finds David and holds him unconditionally. To be loved by God in this way is "better than life" (v. 3), or to put it another way, it is to begin to live.

Steadfast love is a primary feature of God's character as a forgiving and redeeming God. In other words, the psalmist recognizes that human life depends ultimately on God's faithfulness. We often think of life in terms of biology—breathing lungs, pumping heart, etc. Other times we think of life in terms of what we do—our work, our play, our families, etc. Yet in Psalm 63, David says that God's love is better than life. God's grace and faithfulness are absolutely essential to our existence.

Prayer Is a Response of Love

We hunger for God.

We turn to Him and realize He is great, and He is with us. We respond to Him in heartfelt praise. As we live this way, we realize that walking with God is the essence of living. He is the sweetness, the joy, the pleasure of life. Our inner being becomes satisfied with Him "as with the richest of foods" (63:5).

Indeed, as I become more aware of Him, I find love for Him pouring out of my heart: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (73:25). "On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night" (63:6). Day and night, every moment, in good times and in difficult times, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (73:26). "It is good to be near God" (v. 28).

Prayer is a response of love. The more we love Him, the

more precious He becomes to us and the more we want to pray.

There is an ancient tale from India about a young man who was seeking God. He went to a wise old sage for help. "How can I find God?" he asked the old man. The old man took him to a nearby river. Out they waded into the deep water. Soon the water was up just under their chins.

Suddenly the old man seized the young man by the neck and pushed him under the water. He held the young man down until the young man was flailing the water in desperation. Another few seconds and he may well have drowned.

Up out of the water the two of them came. The young man was coughing water from his lungs and still gasping for air. Reaching the bank, he asked the man indignantly, "What did that have to do with my finding God?"

The old man asked him quietly, "While you were under the water, what did you want more than anything else?"

The young man thought for a minute and then answered, "I wanted air. I wanted air more than anything else."

The old man replied, "When you want God as much as you wanted air, you will find Him."

Prayer Is a Response of Trust

I wish I could just snap my fingers and automatically trust God fully in every circumstance. However, a life of faith in all its fullness cannot be willed into existence by a solitary decision. The life of faith is a walk of faith. It must be taken one step at a time. It is a pattern of living that God teaches us day by day, trial by trial, decision by decision. It is acquired by doing.

Jesus doesn't just hand us a map, pat us on the back, and send us off on our journey. The walk of faith is a walk with Him. We're not asked to trust a God who is far away in heaven somewhere. We trust the One who is holding our hand. We trust the One who is always with us (73:23-24).

I trust my wife. I trust her enough to be myself with her. I trust her enough to share my innermost feelings with her. I trust her with my life.

That trust didn't get where it is in one day. The trust has grown from the soil of love. It's been watered by commitment and nourished by time spent together. It's meant holding on tight to her as the troubles of life try to tear us apart.

Trusting God is no different. It grows from a relationship, a love that is alive and vibrant. It develops over time, through trials and daily commitment.

God calls us to trust Him one step at a time. He asks that we turn to Him immediately when we're in need. When our daily road gets steep, He asks that we cling to Him. He wants us to realize that we find all our strength in Him. When the storms blow hard, if we trust Him, we can "sing in the shadow of [His] wings" (63:7).

When you're in need—any need—remember that God has broken down all the barriers between Him and you. You don't need to search for Him. You don't need to work up the right frame of mind. You are always in His presence. Thus, prayer can be as natural as breathing. He is constantly with us, so prayer doesn't need to stop and start. We truly can "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The brilliant scientist Sir Isaac Newton said that he could take his telescope and look millions and millions of miles into space. Then he added, "But when I lay it aside, go into my room, shut the door, and get down on my knees in earnest prayer, I see more of heaven and feel closer to the Lord than if I were assisted by all the telescopes on earth."

Words to Remember: *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).*