

# Essay on Prayer: the Language Spoken with God

## Article One

Prayer is a very fascinating activity that has been used in a multitude of ways by various people throughout humankind to communicate with their higher power. People in our modern times continue to use this avenue to find ways of drawing upon something beyond themselves from which they can attempt to bring about strength, encouragement and assistance that otherwise is not available to them through standard tangible ways. The phrase “my prayers are with you” is frequently mentioned especially in times of local, national and personal tragedy and loss. But what exactly does that mean? What is prayer? How do I do utilize it? What things should I even be praying about? If someone says their prayers are with me what exactly is the content of these prayers and who exactly are they calling to in prayer? I say all this to bring out the idea that prayer seems to be a do whatever you want and however you want, non-standardized subjective practice. But is that ok? Or can our assumptions about prayer be our downfall in this seemingly meaningful exercise?

This is why I call prayer a *language* that is spoken to God. Languages bring about the idea that one cannot simply assume that they can speak to someone else simply because they have desire to do so or that because others can speak in a different language we can too. The truth about a language is that it has rules for communication that are designed to make it effective for the two parties involved. And therefore, to assume that we can just “wing it” in communication doesn’t work because it ends up failing to create a relationship no matter how much we feel it should work.

I was a person who felt I had a good grasp of the language of prayer with God because I had observed others’ prayers and had prayed many times myself and felt very genuine in those times. But looking back, I now see that I was very limited in my communication with God as I was actually using just “very simple phrases” that really kept my prayer life with God at a quaint level. It was very much like my ability years ago to speak the Spanish language to Spanish speakers. We could carry on a very basic level of communication, but I wasn’t able to effectively communicate anything deep or complex despite my desire to do so. But had I taken the time to learn the language and put the needed effort into it, I would have had much more rewarding and effective times with these Spanish speaking people.

This isn't to say that we can't just say a very heartfelt adolescent prayer and know that God will hear it and assist us. But if that is as far as we go with prayer without taking the time to really learn how to speak the language of prayer, then we are short changing ourselves on our potential effectiveness in prayer and in our potential relationship level with God himself. So yes, prayer is very simple, but it is also something not simple that needs to be learned and done with diligence and resolve.

This essay is geared to examining our prayer communication with God, the God of the Holy Bible. This is not meant to be prayer to any god or higher power of choice as that is of no real value according to my faith, faith rooted solely in the bible. I hope that you will come along with me in this discussion with an open mind, not naively believing everything I say and not coming in close minded with the goal to simply affirm and defend your current position in this area. I want people to see their prayer lives through the lens of the bible and what it says so that they can be objectively rooted in God's language and thereby to become amazingly effective in their prayers to God and in their relationship with him also.

I want to start off with a few quotations from some men of prayer and their encouragements (and occasional lacerations) for our lives in this area. Andrew Murray states, "But when we learn to regard it {prayer} as the highest part of the work entrusted to us, the root and strength of all other work, we shall see that there is nothing that we so need to study and practice as the art of praying aright."<sup>1</sup> Also in regards to the need of prayer in our time D.A. Carson relates, "What is both surprising and depressing is the sheer prayerlessness that characterizes so much of the Western church. It is surprising, because it is out of step with the Bible that portrays what Christian living should be; it is depressing, because it frequently coexists with abounding Christian activity that somehow seems hollow, frivolous, and superficial. Scarcely less disturbing is the enthusiastic praying in some circles that overflows with emotional release but is utterly uncontrolled by any thoughtful reflection on the prayers of scripture."<sup>2</sup> And when it comes to the actual activity of prayer, he goes on to say, "Suppose, for example, that 80 or 90 percent of our petitions ask God for good health, recovery from illness, safety on the road, a good job, success in exams, the emotional needs of our children, success in our mortgage application, and much more of the same. How much of our praying is far removed from the center of Paul's praying, then even our very praying may serve as a wretched testimony to the remarkable success of the process of paganization in our life and thought."<sup>3</sup> Beyond the need to pray and to pray for things we are truly to be praying for, he also reminds us of the arena we enter into and the engagement we must have stating "Paul understands that this business of praying, of struggling in prayer, is no more than the entailment of the fact that we are engaged in supernatural conflict. We are not out on the streets simply trying to convince people intellectually. Our aim is not to impress people with our musical taste, fiery eloquence,

or emotional power. We are out to win people to Jesus Christ; new birth is required, a demonstration of the power of God in conversion and transformation. Satan himself stands against us.”<sup>4</sup> And for all the action oriented Christians out there who view prayer as no more than a pat religious device to do before engaging in the “real work” of Christianity, I will have to agree with Mahatma Gandhi who is quoted as saying, “Prayer is not an old woman’s idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action.”

Prayer is so essential and so critical if we are to get our amazing God to assist our feeble human efforts to live out this amazing life he has called us to that we must take the necessary time to see it as it really is. We need to understand that it isn’t simply what we do to bless the “more important” disciplines of the gospel but it is of itself an integral part of our gospel mission! Worship, bible study, evangelism, loving relationships, and helping the less fortunate all are in vital need of God’s assistance through prayer. A false ceiling of gospel effectiveness is created by a lack of taking prayer seriously. God wants us to see the results that he desires for us as we call to him in prayer, deep faithful biblical prayer. The adventure is awaiting and the power is available, but the question is always, “Do we have faith in the power of prayer?”

The rest of this essay is going to follow an outline consisting of views of God and their relationship to our prayer life, prayer’s different facets, prayer killers, examples of biblical prayers, and some final miscellaneous thoughts on prayer. My hope is that after you read this essay and more deeply examine the prayers of the bible, you will become more equipped to serve, honor, and love your God and through this become more like Jesus Christ.

## **Article Two**

In any relationship, the more we understand each other and have a desire for a mutual fulfilling connection, the more encouraging and impactful that relationship will be. This is really no different in our relationship with God. Being able to have a healthy and correct view of him and how he feels about us is of utmost importance in having a great prayer life. Many of us can have misunderstandings about who God is and even more importantly how he views us and feels about us. Any alteration of a correct view will affect our prayer life and the capacity of us to have an incredible relationship with Him. Incorrect viewpoints can happen to any of us. We can sometimes transfer how our human fathers or other human figures relate to us as to how God relates to us instead of letting the bible define him. We can occasionally equate how we feel about him to how he must feel about us. And we can let other people, society, and culture define God. These *will* affect how we interact with God in prayer. If our God is too small, our prayers will be puny. If our God is mean and uncaring, our prayers will be

insincere and curt. If our God is unconcerned or aloof, our prayers will be rare and artificial. If our God is unloving, our prayers will end up ritualistic. If our God doesn't believe in us, then our prayers won't be faithful or powerful. And if our God is harsh and not gracious, then our prayers will only be guilt ridden and wrongly motivated.

We must take the time to get to know who the real God is. We need to work through any issues we have with him. And we need to come to see him as he is and come to a place that we honestly in our heart of hearts desire him if we are ever to really become men and women of prayer. When we see him as he is, and we desire him as we should, the most natural thing we will want to do is to communicate with him, to pray to him. We will look forward to our times with him, we will try to find as many times as possible to pray to him, we will see the effect that prayer truly has, and we will want to hear his guiding as much as possible. To think that somehow we can have a vibrant authentic prayer life separated from a healthy understanding of God is just not possible. Now, I will say that God will meet us where we are at in the journey to understand Him better and more deeply, but we need to see that, like in any healthy relationship, growth and maturation don't just happen but take a concerted effort on our part. But is there really any relationship we wouldn't want to cultivate more than with our creator, our amazing God and Father?

Lastly, I want to encourage you that the more you get to understand the different traits of God the more it will impact the various things you will pray for. For example, if I meet a person who I find out is a medical doctor, I will be much more likely to ask him about medical issues than I would if I simply saw him as a friend without this ability. And if I learned that one of my friends spent years in the past as an auto mechanic, you can bet I'll ask their advice about my vehicle since they have the skill and know-how to help me, but I'm not going to waste their time if this wasn't their skillset- I'm going to the expert instead! The same is true of God. The more I learn about his areas of interest and "expertise" the more avenues of prayer I will see to bring to him.

### **Article Three**

Sometimes I can find my prayer life in the past and even now get into lackluster routine and into ruts of praying very one dimensionally. God wants us to communicate with him on many different levels and in regard to many different things. I call these different areas *facets*. As God is multifaceted so our prayers can and really should be multifaceted. The first area I believe our prayers should have incorporated into them is an *emotional facet*. God is not looking for robots. If that was what he wanted, he could have taken out free will, taken out our emotional capacities and simply had drones that mindlessly and heartlessly called to him. But as we know, God is a very emotional god. He relates to us in scripture his feelings many times and they are strong and often

intense. His being this way is also a call for us to be this way. We can often hide or shy away from being emotional in prayer because of many reasons. We may be uncomfortable with disclosing our emotions, we may have been taught to be “unemotionally pious” in regards to God or we may even have seen the effects of sinful emotions run amuck in our lives and others’ lives and not want to bring any emotions into our prayer life for fear of these past experiences. But God desires (yes, that is an emotion) us to be emotionally connected to him. In the book *Teach Us To Pray*, in relationship to Psalm 84:1-2, Steve Kinnard states, “True prayer is a yearning for God. The person who rightly prays hungers and thirsts for God.”<sup>1</sup> In the same book Teresa Furguson relates from Hebrews 5:7, “Another lesson in this account is that we must *cry out*. This means that we are urgent, passionate and yet humble. Nice little quiet time chats with God may have their place, but if we are really to move God, it will take some desperate times of pleading and weeping.”<sup>2</sup>

This aspect of emotional prayers involves us being completely real, fully expressive, candidly raw, and consistently deep. Why this level of emotions in prayer? It’s because we are very emotional beings with very strong emotions that if left to ourselves and not brought to God, can easily go to very dark and ungodly places. God wants us to communicate with him at our deepest levels. Jesus demonstrated many times his emotions to the Father in prayer (Hebrews 5:7, and Matthew 26:36-42). And many great prayers in the bible demonstrate people calling out to God full of raw emotion (I Kings 8:28) and how God listened to the cries, tears, and emotional communication of his people. If allowing yourself to be emotional in prayer with God is hard for you, remember that he knows you better than anyone and can handle any emotions you throw his way. The beauty of praying with emotion is that it allows us to really connect with him and to really connect with how we are feeling. Sometimes we don’t even know what we are feeling, and can walk around as numb, out of touch Christians, but with unbridled emotional talks with him, he can help us to sort out our issues, concerns, and heart itself and take us to a very good place spiritually. Have we not all felt at times extreme discouragement, or even surprisingly full of intense joy and let it simply sit inside us instead of bringing these emotions (and so many more) to God to help us take them where he wants them to be. As a parent, I want my daughter to not just inform me of the various things that she is doing and what is going on in her life, but I want her to share with me her emotions as she navigates through her life. What is she feeling about school, does she have fears about things right now, is she happy or sad, and how does she feel about our relationship. I desire this type of conversation because I love her and want to connect with her as her father at a deep level. I believe the same, though much, much more so does God want that with all of us!

## **Article Four**

Similar to the facet of emotion in prayer, but not quite the same is what I call the **worshipful facet**. Worshipful prayer is so important because, quite frankly, we just often skip it and get right into all the things we want and need and forget even really who it is that we are talking to and what he has done for us. This can have a negative effect on our overall focus. Douglas Steere in his book *Dimensions of Prayer* states, "A curious paradox often occurs in the prayer of adoration. The time when we turn away from our petitions and intercessions, our problems and our desires, and simply sit or kneel in thankfulness in God's presence has a strangely ordering effect upon all that we are and all that we are carrying."<sup>1</sup> If we forget who it is that we are coming to in prayer we can easily slip into "the genie in the bottle syndrome" of only communicating to God when we need something. This can slowly erode the relationship with God and replace it with an immature gimme gimme gimme hollow relationship that won't last long. Worshipful prayer allows us to continue to draw near to God for what we need in our relationship with him. He wants us to praise and thank him. He wants us to be in awe of him and to have a fear of him and yet also to have a calm peace with him in prayer. Only when we worship God can we truly have a genuine relationship with him. He must be first, and we and all of our desires must be second to that. Murray states, "First, *Thy* name, *Thy* kingdom, *Thy* will; then give *us*, forgive *us*, lead *us*, deliver *us*. The lesson is of more importance than we think. In true worship the Father must be first, must be all. The sooner I learn to forget myself in the desire that he may be glorified, the richer will the blessing be that prayer will bring to myself."<sup>2</sup> But unfortunately, it is often "give me this please and help me with this please" and we forget God's will and his desires that we are to pray for.

Worshipful prayer is a natural consequence to the person who is living in the full understanding of how awesome and wonderful their God is (Psalm 89:8). We have no problem praising him when we think of all the great things he has done for us in the past like creating us and doing phenomenal things for us time and time again (Psalm 139:14). Gratitude expressed to God is such a powerful answer to the tendency to get into a state of complaining and discouragement. This state of being focused on all that isn't right with our world is a breeding ground for sin to move in; in contrast to this dark and dangerous mindset is to try to fill in our yearning for joy and fulfillment with thanksgiving and gratitude offered to God which helps combat the traps to instead go into sinful thoughts and activities (Ephesians and Colossians flesh this out).

Another aspect of worshipping God in our prayer has to do with coming to him with an attitude of reverence and awe. Too often, if we are just causal with him all the time, but not also in a constant state of awe for the consuming fire of a God that he is (Hebrews 12:28-29), we can start treating his commands with less respect and act like they are more of just nice little encouragements than real straightforward commands from the Almighty. The desire to fulfill the Great Commission becomes more of an occasional

passing fancy to give brief energy to the Great Suggestion. But staying in worshipful prayer is what God deems acceptable and safeguards us from returning to making ourselves god and him simply our big buddy in the sky. We were designed to be in a relationship with him where we revere him and stand in awe of him and what he does and will do.

One of the great things about worshipful prayer is that it takes us to a place of peace as we draw near to God and offer up our concerns and worries and stressful situations to him knowing that he can take care of all things and wants to release our anxieties. Peace doesn't come from a prayer life devoid of worship to our Maker. He wants us to be at the point where we can literally rejoice in him as we constantly bring our lives and all of our issues to him. Only he can bring this peace that the world will never be able to bring, a peace we won't be able to fathom outside of him.

For many of us, worship may be something foreign and an activity we aren't familiar or comfortable with. But God knows where you are at and he can draw you in at a pace that you can handle. Just start with coming up with a list of things that you're thankful for and tell him your thanks for these things. Also read the bible and when you see things he has done, take a moment and praise him for that. When you see God work in someone's life, go to God and give him the credit for it. And at times, make sure that you are serious in your prayers and are remembering exactly who it is that you are talking to – yes he is the powerful God who created the universe, he is serious about his holiness and he is the one who will judge all people and make the final decision about our eternal destination.

With that powerful aspect of God to remember, we must balance our worship also with the intimacy he so desires with us. Thomas Jones in *Teach Us To Pray* tells us that “abba Father” was never used in the bible in Old Testament times until Jesus used it to define the kind of intimately personal relationship we can have with God especially in our prayers.<sup>3</sup> This prayer should be significantly personal for us with God, not religious, cold and impersonal.

## **Article Five**

Another very important facet of prayer is the *humble facet*. This facet of prayer is essential to keep in mind the difference between communicating with each other and communicating with God. There is something special we get to do as a created being that we should never take for granted – that is the simple fact that we can talk directly to our Creator. And even more spectacular is the reality that he actually wants to talk with us! As mentioned in Revelation 4:11, we should get extremely excited that we were created in the first place. He never had to make us. He could have skipped us and just moved on to the next human being, but no, he made a conscious effort to create

us as an important individual designed to have a relationship with him. That alone should be reason enough to desire prayer with him, and it should keep us humble remembering that everything we are and have and ever can achieve is only because of him as our creator and sustainer. Praying in this light is essential because it keeps us in reality of our needs and his ability to care for all of our needs.

David relates to God in his psalm, "I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin." (Psalm 38:18) And Ezra dramatically communicates to God the sin going on when it relates to us,

"While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men, women and children – gathered around him. They too wept bitterly." (Ezra 10:1)

Confession to God in prayer seems to be a lost art, so often an ignored area of our humble communication with God. Admitting our sin directly to God should have an *effect* on us. It should create a needed sense of disgust, embarrassment and hopefully and ultimately a sense with God of godly sorrow as related in II Corinthians chapter seven. Bill Hybels gives us a good reminder from his book *Too Busy Not To Pray*, "when I lump all my sins together and confess them en masse, it's not too painful or embarrassing. But if I take those sins out of the pile one by one and call them by name, it's a whole new ball game."<sup>1</sup> Without communicating to God on all levels of needed openness, how can we really cultivate the relationship with him we need? Confession and repentance are meant by God to bring us to change and refreshment (Acts 3:19), he isn't our Father simply to hear all the "highlights" in our life, but he wants to be there to help us through our lowest lows and darkest sinful times as well – that's a true faithful father!

I was raised in the United States in a culture where you are supposed to be the one to make yourself who you are to be and you aren't to rely on anyone else to get you where you want to be in life. But the spiritual problem with this paradigm is that it doesn't take long to realize that no matter how hard you try, you can't do everything you need to too become the Christian you are called to be. You can never attain to the Christ-like standard that the bible calls you to. But that is exactly the point! God never intended for us to be independent creatures, but dependent creatures who constantly rely on God and are able to then give him the glory for all the positive and great things that occur in our lives (Psalm 86:1 and II Chronicles 20:12). Being in a humble reliant state before God allows us to be at peace and it allows us to have the calm of a tender young child in the care of their protective parent. Outside of this atmosphere, prayer can degrade to anxiety laden, fearful words that doesn't leave us feeling anything more than worried and faithless about the bible's teaching about prayer's effects on us. If humble prayers have not been in your life, I highly encourage you to focus on this area and let your



“abba father” communicate with you through your prayers. And one more important aspect of humble prayer often forgotten is *listening*. Having the realization that God too has important things to say and if we are only talking all the time and not listening, we are missing out on having an ear to the Spirit. Lack of listening can destroy any relationship. Lack of listening to God is no different.

## Article Six

I have heard many people say that prayer should just be us talking to God about whatever comes into our minds at the moment; and I think there is some good truth about that in regards to keeping our relationship natural and simple. But I also think that we must have the aspect of *methodical prayer* to make sure that we are also communicating to him many needs and concerns that are otherwise forgotten about in our busy helter-skelter lives. This is not meant to degrade into some form of rout mechanical legalism, but to really be responsible effective hard working men and women of prayer who are battling in the spiritual warfare of prayer. And methodical praying can keep our relationship with God from becoming disorganized and limited to just whims and fancies.

People with methodical consistent prayer lives are actually some of the most effective followers of God (Daniel 6:10). Even Jesus, when asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, didn't tell them to just wing it and go with whatever the winds of the moment were bringing them. But he gave them some structure and some important meaningful areas to focus on (Luke 11:2-4). Praying methodically doesn't necessarily equal more words as more prayer just for the sake of more prayer is ridiculous and actually reprimanded by Jesus, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.” (Matthew 6:7)

Praying with intent requires mental thought. Hybels mentions, “Before bringing a request to the Lord, it's a good idea to ask: If God granted this request, would it bring glory to him? Would it advance his kingdom? Would it help people? Would it help me to grow spiritually?1 Without putting thought and some contemplation into our prayers, we can easily fall into the trap of simply having a prayer life of religious phrases and words that have little to no impact. But we want our prayers to make a difference and we want to pray for what we should be praying for, so therefore time and thought must go into our prayer lives.

Methodical prayers should be filled with not just our typical personal desires filling intercessory prayers, but also should contain a good deal of time to praise and thank God, to confess to him, and to pray for the needs of others. Also, Carson in his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* talks about the huge need to try to tie as many requests to Scripture as possible.<sup>2</sup>

First Peter 4:7 states, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." Having a mind that is clear is essential for our communication with God. So many times I find myself trying to pray but my mind is so busy with so many things that I find I'm not even praying but just mouthing words as I drift off in thoughts, worries and concerns of my day. We need to find times and places where we can pray without these mental distractions and really just zero in on God and our prayers to him. Of course, this doesn't mean we shouldn't have short small prayers though out our day as needed, but what I am talking about are our longer focused times with him, some people refer to these as their "quiet times." For me, it tends to be more often at night, and easiest if I am walking outside. Ultimately, just give yourself the TIME that you need to be able to relax, even if just for a short period, and just focus all of your energies on God.

We need to focus on what God's will is for us and understand that he wants us to do this will and that he wants us to come to him for help in obeying and fulfilling his will for our lives. Carson relates about this concept from Psalm 143:10, "What God has mandated is his will; our responsibility is to do it. The psalmist does not here encourage us to find God's will, for he assumes it is already known. Rather, he is concerned with performance of that will. When he says, 'Teach me,' he does not say, 'Teach me your will,' but 'Teach me to do your will.'"<sup>3</sup> Becoming more structured, organized and intellectual in our prayers will only add to the growth of our prayer lives and relationship with God, not encumber us with robotic legalism. So don't be afraid to spend some time thinking through what you pray for and become more educated about what you should be praying for in the first place. Remember, even in the best of human relationships, communication takes effort both emotionally and intellectually.

## Article Seven

The next area or facet of prayer is what I find the most exciting area for me personally, but also sometimes the most lacking. This is the *faithful prayer facet*. Jesus would often tie in our faith or lack thereof to prayer. There is really no getting around the fact that as Randy McKean says in *Radical Faith - 10 Faith Secrets* that if we aren't praying then we don't have faith and vice a versa.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we pray and if we don't get an immediate light speed answer from God we get jaded and just stop praying. Jesus decries this level of faith and tells us to pray and pray and then keep on praying (Luke 18:1-8). So often we can forget the examples of answered prayer in the bible and the time involved from the initial asking to the time of a concrete answer being provided.

When we have a lack of faith or a roughed up faith, we can start changing exactly what we are praying for to avoid further feelings of not seeing our prayers answered or not answered along our time table. These prayers become very ambiguous and full of

religious sounding jargon but lack any concrete specifics about what we actually want to see God do. Mark Templer states in *The Prayer of the Righteous*, "Mighty prayers are specific....But we are not specific. Specific prayers are faithful prayers, mighty in power."2 But the amazing thing about having faithful prayers is that when God gives his answer to these prayers, our faith in him can only grow – even if his answer is no! Jesus even challenged his disciples to pray "mountain moving" prayers that were in line with his will because he wants to answer these prayers, he wants to work in our lives and do very powerful things through us for God's glory! We need to see that this area of prayer is not some hyped up 21<sup>st</sup> century church fad – but actually what Jesus has wanted in our communication with the Father for centuries. The early Christians understood the need for earth shaking prayers that were in line with the will of God. They knew what God's will was and they desperately wanted to fulfill it in their lives so they prayed for it with faithful specific boldness (Acts 4:29-31).

Faithful prayer also sees that God works powerfully in others' lives through our prayers for them. Paul reminds Timothy of his prayers for Timothy (II Timothy 1:3), and in some of his other biblical writings we see him mention the incredible part of his prayer life devoted to helping other Christians. And the flip side is true also. Having faith in the impact of prayer of other Christians should call us to ask them for prayers for us. Paul understood this amazing avenue for spiritual (and physical) assistance in his life and called upon others to pray for him (Romans 15:30-32), and often! His faith in other's prayers for him and desire for them is inspiring. Carson states in regards to Romans 15, "The apostle does not lay a distant recommendation on these Roman believers he has not yet met, but passionately beseeches them."3 It takes both faith to ask someone to pray for us, but it also takes some humility. Admitting to ourselves and then to someone else that we need assistance from them through their prayers demonstrates our understanding of our inability to maximize our efforts for God on our prayers alone. What a great way to be in union with someone else than by the giving and receiving of prayers to God for one another.

I found this to be a rewarding experience personally to start spending more energy praying for others, some that I know and some that I don't know on a personal level. I made a decision in my local church (along with a small group of people) to pray for a few churches in my international fellowship of churches every Sunday and by about one year to have prayed for every one of them around the world. It is very spiritually rewarding to know that we as Christians can have an impact on people, churches, and countries we otherwise could have no impact on.

## **Article Eight**

The next facet of prayer was honestly the area in my previous prayer life most lacking and of which I found myself embarrassingly most ignorant of – that being the prayer facet of *scriptural prayer*. I am now surprised that I hadn't really looked intently at the various prayers and teachings on prayer seen throughout scripture for me to learn from and to imitate. I would look at many other aspects of the Christian life from the bible to gain guidance and direction, but for whatever reason, I basically ignored much of the information on prayer. Murray comments in relation to how different people tend to worship that unfortunately, "some who in their ignorance hardly know what they ask: they pray earnestly, and yet receive but little."<sup>1</sup> And Templer states, "The scripture commands us 'pray in the Holy Spirit' (Jude 20) and to 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions' (Ephesians 6:18). What does this mean? I believe it means we must have spiritual prayers – alive and aware of God, not simply mouthing empty words or rituals. Our prayers are spiritual when they are deeply rooted in Scripture."<sup>2</sup>

There are so many great things that the bible teaches us to pray about. We see examples from amazing men and women as to what they prayed about that were important enough for us to see that God made sure they were recorded in scripture. We see the need to pray for things such as spiritual discernment when making decisions and choices in life, we see the need for people to better understand God's love being prayed for. We see prayers lifted up for getting better understanding of God's power available for us, and prayers to bring about more glory to God through our lives. Prayers given for enemies and their wellbeing, prayers for people to work in God's harvest fields, and prayers for standing firm in God's will. I found that most of what I prayed for tended to be of the physical nature: things like health, financial stability, job issues, et cetera. But often prayers for my spiritual life and living out God's will through his help were only occasional and often forgotten – and especially when it came to my prayers for other Christians.

Too often the saying is true that where our heart is there our mind is also. My attention can become so wrapped up in just the physical here and now that I don't see the spiritual realm that we are all a part of. Yet if there is anything I should be pouring my heart and energies into, it is the spiritual arena, the things that matter for eternity, the things that please God, the things that have the potential to bring God his deserved glory! I want to challenge you as I have challenged myself to look into the bible, start learning what was often being prayed for. Spend time in your communication calling on God for these areas. Now that doesn't mean God doesn't also want us to pray for our physical needs, by no means. And I also want to remind you that many prayers in the bible have nothing to do with personal desires and intercession, but with praising and glorifying God. There are great examples of things so fit to thank God for that he was doing and had done and even just acknowledging the amazing qualities of who he is.

## Article Nine

In the last of the facets of prayer, I think it important to talk about *dynamic prayer*. Just as any human relationship can get stale and become mechanistic, so too can our prayer relationship with God. Our prayer lives were never designed to be arduous, boring trudging, but fresh, invigorating and special with our God. Sure there are crucial elements of discipline, suffering, and work involved in a good prayer life. But we should never let our prayers become the death of us. The scriptures tell us of praying while standing, walking, on the ground prostrate, hands in the air, and faces down turned for example. People said short prayers, long prayers, and prayed in homes, deserts, palaces, temples, gardens, and prison cells. People prayed alone and with others. Prayer was done in various times of day and sometimes all night.

The scriptures don't tell us what one specific way to pray in regards to these things. I believe this is to keep us from turning prayer from a relationship with God to a religious act and dry ceremony. God wants to keep his relationship with us fresh and enjoyable. If you are anything like me, you need to meet with God in different ways and places at times to keep yourself from becoming stale with God. I occasionally have to go out of my normal prayer routine to shake things up, and by shake things up I mean shake myself up and get the spiritual cobwebs out. God is so worth our attention to this. There is truly no person we should become a great communicator with then with our creator, the one who loves us and understands us like no one else.

Lastly in regards to the dynamic prayer facet, I want to mention the need to carve out time to just sit and listen. As Hybels says, "People who are really interested in hearing from God must pay a price: they must discipline themselves to be still before God. This is not an easy task, but it is essential. Psalm 46:10 says, 'Be still, and know that I am God.'"<sup>1</sup> We are too busy, too distracted and too self-focused most of the time. We need to set aside times, be they daily or at least regularly to just listen to God, to meditate and gain some perspective into what we're doing and what he wants us to be doing and even how he feels about us. Time in prayer when we don't say anything but just pause, listen and reflect, gives God's Spirit a chance to speak to us, to move our hearts and guide us. Many of us are not good listeners, and I think the same can go with listening to God. He wants to direct us, he wants to encourage us, and he even wants to correct us sometimes. Let's not shortchange these times with God by being so consumed with talking that we don't also listen - God's Spirit has things he wants us to hear.

## Article Ten

Now we are going to change gears and talk about "ten prayer killers." When we start discussing prayer and how amazing and powerful it is, we must remember some of the

things that can quash it, that can become our Achilles' heel. Achilles was a character from Greek mythology and in one of the descriptions of his life and story was said to have been dipped by his mother Thetis into the river Styx to make him immortal. As she dipped him into the water she was holding him by his heel and thus that one area of his body was kept from being immortalized. Later on in life during a battle he ended up getting shot with an arrow on his heel and that ended up being his downfall. The point of saying that someone may have an Achilles' heel is basically to say that even with all the great things a person can achieve, a significant weakness may be present and when challenged or called upon, may render the person inept in a specific scenario bringing failure. When it comes to our effectiveness in prayer, we too can have our Achilles' heel that keeps our effectiveness at bay. The first thing that kills prayer should be very obvious. It is *prayerlessness*. The simple fact is that if we don't pray (James 4:2), we will not be getting much in the way of assistance from God and we will not be developing our relationship with him. Yet astoundingly, many of us self-professing Christians can get swept up into so many activities of God, but not actually spend any real quality time in prayer with him. Randy McKeen states, "To not pray is to show self-sufficiency. This is true at all times for all people. It doesn't matter what we say or feel. A prayerless person is always a faithless person! Prayer also determines how much of God's power is at our disposal."<sup>1</sup>

A second prayer killer is *unconfessed sin*. Passages like Isaiah 59:2 and Psalm 66:18-19 make it clear that we will not have the ear of God if we are blatantly living in sin. No king would have as an audience to his throne any person who did not come in peace. And so to think that we can go to the righteous, pure King of Kings in a state of defiance and him to willingly want to hear us and assist us in our rebellious state is quite ludicrous. Now that doesn't mean he doesn't want to hear our prayers, but I believe he is more concerned first and foremost about our personal righteousness than moving on to other areas - first things first! Leonard Ravenhill in his book *Why Revival Tarries* states, "Someone says, 'We must pray if we want to live a holy life!' Yes, but conversely, we must live a holy life if we want to pray. According to David, 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.' (Psalm 24:3, 4)."<sup>2</sup> Let's not let sin be the downfall of our personal life and the downfall of our effectiveness in our prayer lives.

The next area may seem somewhat unusual at first glance, but to God it is very important as we can't separate our prayer life from other areas of our Christian walk. This third area is *unresolved relational conflict*. I like how in I Peter 3:7 we see demonstrated just how important to him are good, healthy and unified relationships. Here Peter tells us that if a husband is not being respectful of his wife, that that will end up hindering his prayers. Once again, God does not want us to avoid praying, but he wants us to see just how important it is to come to him as a person who is authentic, a

person who isn't in one moment disrespecting a close relationship and the next moment flipping the switch so to speak and asking God to answer his prayers. God is not happy with hypocrisy and we see that many times in Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders of his time. I would say, take a moment and think through any person you may be at odds with, maybe just in your heart, or maybe outright in your recent interactions and come to godly resolution. And do this not just from motivation to improve your prayer life, but because it is right in God's eyes.

The next area is big in my American culture. This fourth area is *selfishness*. James 4:3 says, "*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*" It was amazing to me as I started getting serious about prayer and analyzing what it was exactly that I was praying for that much of my prayers were actually quite selfish and had little or nothing to do with God's will for my life. I realized from this self-evaluation that too often my mind and heart can be so swept up by the worries, concerns and quite frankly the desires of this world that I was, as James says, caught up in my pleasures more than the work of the Kingdom of God and his will for my life. God is not interested in answering all of our temporal desires that are caught up in self-fulfillment and worldly pleasure. He didn't create us in Christ Jesus for that but to be his workmanship (Ephesians 2:10) and to go about working for him to advance his eternal cause. Now that isn't to say that he doesn't want to give us good things along the way and allow us to have fun and enjoy this world he created for us, but too many of us have gone way too far into the world of self-indulgence that we need a wakeup call to his plan for our lives.

Fifthly, an *uncaring attitude* will keep God's ears far from us. Proverbs 21:13 reports, "*If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.*" A love of our fellow man, no matter who that person may be, is close to God's heart. He mentions many times in scripture our need to care for the less fortunate around us, to do what we can with what resources we have to make a difference for those in need. Simply trying to ignore the less fortunate and go about living for God (including praying to him) just doesn't work - look at the attempts made by the priest and Levite in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. In fact, a good deal of our prayers should be given for those in less fortunate circumstances than us. They need our prayers for assistance, we need to pray for God to open our eyes to these, we need to ask God to give us the resources to help them, and we need to get God's help to enlarge our hearts to these people.

The next prayer killer is likely one that many of us think about and hear quite often - that sixth area being *faithlessness*. Once again James hits on an area of concern in praying (James 1:5-8) when letting us know that it is vital that we have belief that God can answer our prayers. If we don't have faith that God can answer our prayers, then

what is the motivation even behind our praying? Are we doing it to simply fulfill some religious duty, calm our conscious, or basically throwing a coin in a fountain hoping that maybe we'll get lucky some day with a helpful answer back? When it comes to praying, God means business! He doesn't ask us to pray for no reason, to just waste our time, or to help us to somehow feel more "spiritual." He wants to develop our relationship with him, he wants to empower us for bringing him glory through our lives, and he wants to use us to do the good works of his will. Prayer is one of his vital methods of getting important things accomplished. It's about seeing great and spectacular things happen in our lives and the lives of those around us, it's about becoming intoxicated with God, and it's about pushing forward his kingdom on this earth.

Another component to hurting our prayer life is *busyness*. I'll let these two authors speak on this one. First, Hybels relates, "the archenemy of spiritual authenticity is busyness, which is closely tied to something the Bible calls *worldliness* – getting caught up with this society's agenda, objectives and activities to the neglect of walking with God. Any way you cut it, a key ingredient in authentic Christianity is time. Not leftover time, not throw away time, but quality time. Time for contemplation, meditation and reflection. Unhurried, uninterrupted time."<sup>3</sup> And Carson states, "the reality is that we seldom take time to think, to meditate, to wonder, to analyze; we seldom take time to pray...if you are too busy to pray, you are too busy, cut something out."<sup>4</sup> I concur. And I think most of us wanting to grow with God in prayer would agree. But the challenge comes when we get down to the matter of what needs to be taken out of our current schedule. Be forewarned if you think this will be an easy task for you. It may be for a one time occurrence, but to have an opened up schedule day in and day out for more prayer can be a challenge. This is often because for various reasons we really like what we are giving our time and schedules to. But be willing to purge something and see how this changes you and your prayer life. I'm not saying that you need to become a monk and live out in some secluded place, but to start opening up the time needed to really speak with and listen to God – it is so much more valuable than what we may currently be doing in its place. And make no bones about it, time is essential! We must not let ourselves be deceived that we can day in and day out rely on a frenetic pace that consistently relegates our prayers to only the quick and hurried "get'r done" mentality as being one more item on our big to do list to check off. We need consistent times (although this may not be everyday) to slow down and have a good relaxed conversation with God not constantly staring at the clock or our phones to make sure we finish up quickly.

The next area is mostly for the Christians who have experienced good success in their lives with God in some area(s) and have seen him work in their lives in the past. What can creep in is the temptation of the eighth prayer killer that being *self-sufficiency*. We



can live like this even as Christians if we've seen God do things that we have been a part of before and can be lulled into thinking we can just do it again and forget to rely on him further in prayer under the assumption that all we need now is to do it ourselves – and thus snuff God out of the picture. This is similar to the idea of pragmatism. Pragmatism here being the idea that if something was successful before then the doing of it in that certain way justifies that it was the right way to succeed in that scenario. So then we throw in our prideful self-sufficiency and push aside prayer and reliance on God to do it again. Yet God never wants us to become self-sufficient but God-sufficient and to stay that way. A great example is in I Samuel 5:17-25 where David when confronted with basically the exact same battle scenario as previously experienced *still* goes back to God for the answer and direction – which ends up being different but successful. Our humility is so profoundly needed to become great men and women of prayer. Prideful self-confidence, and related lack of prayer can lead us into many unfortunate situations and life choices (look at Joshua 9:9-15) that could have been prevented with prayerful calling on God for direction.

Next, *feelings of bitterness, unworthiness and shame* can really put a death grip on our prayer life. This ninth area of a prayer killer can be used by Satan to get into our heads the idea that God doesn't want to listen to us, that he is fed up with us, or that we aren't somehow ever good enough to bring our requests to him. And quite honestly we may not want to pray to him because we dislike or even hate him for bad things we attribute to him. We can often be unaware of these feelings inside of us as they relate directly to how we view God as we likely are not verbalizing them to ourselves or to others - as this may seem somehow anti-Christian or completely out of sorts with "normal" God loving people. But the truth is many of us have felt unworthy or ashamed by things we've done or experienced in our interactions with people in our lives. We can so easily view God as way too above us to then want to hear a poor wretch like us. Or we may have experienced a traumatic situation that was very difficult and left us searching for answers and trying to somehow wrap our minds around how a loving God could allow such horrible things to happen (this set of feelings will be further addressed in the next two articles so I'll keep this prayer killer short at this point). Suffice it to say that having a healthy, biblically accurate view and feelings towards God is essential to having a strong long lasting prayer life with God.

Finally, this last prayer killer may at first seem out of place. But when we play it out for what the ramifications might be if we really do engage God in prayer like we are supposed to, the idea scares us. This tenth area is *contentment with mediocrity*. I believe that many Christians deep down do have the understanding that having a strong prayer life will affect them and will enable amazing things to be done in and through them. Steere reports one reason he believes some Christians stop praying, "Is it not a dread of this self-awareness [in regards to our profound awareness to our sins] and this

change that causes each of us to resist the call to continued prayer? Is it not this that causes us to give up vital prayer again and again?"<sup>5</sup> And Carson tells us, "Some Christians want enough of Christ to be identified with him but not enough to be seriously inconvenienced; they genuinely cling to basic Christian orthodoxy but do not want to engage in serious Bible study; they value moral probity, especially of the public sort, but do not engage in war against inner corruptions; they fret over the quality of the preacher's sermon but do not worry much over the quality of their own prayer life. Such Christians are content with mediocrity."<sup>6</sup> I will add that another area for staying in prayer mediocrity can be that we don't like change, especially the change that we create ourselves. We think, and rightly so, that if we start engaging in amazing consistent prayer with God that he will use us, that incredible things will be done by God through us, and that our life will be turned up on its head. And that very thought of significant change to our present status is frightening and the idea makes us want to just hunker down and grab our blanket for the security we have built for ourselves. But once again that is why our prayer life is woven into the fabric of our entire spiritual life. We need faith, peace, good support from other Christians, and a healthy sense that God's truths can be followed as God will support and help us in our weaknesses and needs.

Let us not be content with living a life of mediocrity. Let us deal with our fears, insecurities, and worries. God has such amazing plans for each one of us and having the faith that he will care for us is crucial. He wants us to pray like our first century brothers and sisters. He wants all of us to see glory brought to him through our lives in this millennium just like in the beginning of the first millennium. Let us give God our best and trust that he will give us his best!

## **Article Eleven**

As touched on earlier in the essay is the idea that how we view God has a significant chance to affect how we communicate to him through prayer. Think of people in your life that you have had issues with. If you had bitter feelings towards them you probably tried to avoid having any conversation with them at all to keep from those bitter emotions getting stronger or resurfacing after so much time spent burying them. Or maybe you let someone down who was relying on you for something very important. And now when you see them you feel ashamed and can't bear the thought of conversing any more than necessary so that you can get out of the perceived tension you feel. Or you may have a person at work, in your family, or someone from your past that has wronged you in a significant way and you can't bear the idea of spending any time with them unless forced to because in reality you can't think of anything except the idea of yelling at them and unleashing your pent up feelings of malice towards them.

These same feelings or some similar to them can be given by us to God. Although he is perfect, has never wronged us, always loved us, and wants to help us to have a great relationship with him and end this earthly experience with a one way ticket to eternity with him, we often let many challenges, wrongs, hurts, emotions and judgments affect how we perceive God in relationship to us. And we can then let these interpretations that we have affect how we will spend time communicating with him in prayer. Any faulty view of God in any direction has the potential to affect how we address him and what we feel we should bring to him in our prayers. Wrong understandings of him and his view of us *will* affect us and keep us from developing our relationship and prayers with him to their best potential.

Let me slightly digress for a moment in this essay to spend just a little more time on relationship building. This essay isn't designed to be focused on relationship building so I only want to briefly mention that to gain a good connection to God so that we can have effective prayer times we need to start viewing God correctly and not as our, or someone else's, human father – no matter how great or less than great they are. We need to search and study scripture to let it explain to us who he really is in relationship to us, we need to talk to other mature disciples who have healthy walks with him and get their perspectives. We need to focus on all the things God has done for us and see just how amazing and involved he really is. We also need at times to understand that because of his desire to have reciprocated love from us that that requires giving us all free will in life. And that free will does give people the opportunity to not choose love but evil instead; and that evil can affect us or many others around us. But we shouldn't for a moment believe that this evil is coming from the desire of God, but only an unfortunate byproduct of his giving us free will. He never created us to be robots who are simply programmed to love him (that wouldn't be love), but through giving us free will he has given us the ultimate most important opportunity in life – to choose to love him back!

## **Article Twelve**

Now we will move on to just a few examples from the bible about prayer. These three areas are ones that have been good recent eye openers that at many times I have needed. First, are a few examples of what I used to think of as malicious or unholy prayers. In the book of Psalms we see what are sometimes labeled imprecatory psalms or psalms that communicate to God our outrage towards things in life and our hearts desire for justice even if it means some vindictive form of what we see as justice. Douglas Jacoby in his audio series *Reading, Praying & Living THE PSALMS* talks about examples like Psalm 58:6 and Psalm 137 that at first seem sub-Christian but really show the realness and authenticity of one's true heart at that moment. And he relates that it also demonstrates our need to not stuff our feelings be them psychologically,

emotionally and spiritually; but instead to get them out to God and realize that he can handle them and wants to help guide us through them to a good place spiritually.<sup>1</sup> We also see examples of people like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-15) and Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:2-4, 12-17) where these men are questioning God and trying to figure out how God fits into the picture in very dire and trying times. These types of prayers here and in Psalms aren't meant for us to become complainers and to create gripe sessions, but for us to not be afraid of being true to our feelings and questions and taking them to God instead of "taking it at God" with pent up judgements. God wants to guide our hearts into a positive, spiritually healthy place no matter where that starting place in our hearts is even in its darkest coldest moments.

Another example of prayer comes directly from our lord Jesus himself. Jesus didn't merely teach us to pray, he also demonstrated it in his own life. We see examples of his prayers for surrender to God's will (Matthew 26:39-46), praying in reverent submission (Hebrews 5:7), praying with intimate connection to the Father (Mark 14:36), praying for long periods before making big decisions (Luke 6:12), praying alone and undistracted (Mark 6:46), and he was disciplined in making time for prayer despite having a busy schedule (Mark 1:35). What I find amazing is that he didn't just set an example for us to pray to simply set an example, but because he actually needed to pray! He wasn't mouthing empty words and spending time for nothing but he too needed the power of the Father to strengthen him as he shared in our weaknesses and was also tempted like us. We can so much want to live the life of Christ but not want to take on his prayer life to empower that life. Jesus on earth was dependent on the Father and as he reached out consistently and deeply for him, we too need to follow suit.

One thing I want to bring up about what Jesus taught in regards to prayer is when he mentions to pray in his name. I was always confused by why I and most people would end our prayers by always saying "in Jesus name, amen." Was it just a religious thing to say, was it simply meant to be respectful in closing out our prayer, or would I be wrong to not end my prayer with this phrase or something like it? Andrew Murray expounds with great clarity on this very question in regards to John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-26 when he writes, "Even when we pray to Jesus himself, it must be in His Name. The name represents the person; to ask in the Name is to ask in full union of interest and life and love with Himself, as one who lives in and for Him. Let the Name of Jesus only have undivided supremacy in my heart and life, my faith will grow to the assurance that what I ask in that Name cannot be refused. The name and the power of asking go together; when the Name of Jesus has become the power that rules my life, its power in prayer with God will be seen too."<sup>2</sup> And he goes on to say, "To pray in Christ's name is therefore to be identified with Christ as to our righteousness, and to be identified with Christ in our desires by the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. To pray in the Spirit, to pray according to the will of the Father, to pray in Christ's name, are identical

expressions.”<sup>3</sup> I find it so powerful that God wants to equip us with everything we need to be successful in the things that he deems important – *his will*. I can find myself wanting to be equipped and empowered for all the things in “my will,” but I see that he isn’t interested in supporting my will unless my will is truly his will. God knows that we can’t succeed in living out all the important areas of the gospel without his help and continual guidance and that is why Jesus teaches us to pray knowing this and having faith that God will equip us as he sees best for doing his will. The real question is: do we really want to do his will *his way*? That is the kind of surrendered, humble heart that he wants to move mountains with.

Lastly on prayers in the bible I want to mention the prayers we see of Paul. Prayers he prayed and teachings about what we can focus on in prayer. Tucked in Paul’s biblical writings are some incredible morsels of teaching about prayer. In the past, when I would read one of Paul’s epistles I would usually just skip past the beginning parts and ignore most of the ending parts to get to what I felt was the “real important stuff” sandwiched in the middle areas. I wanted to focus on many of the good teachings he was giving but didn’t pay any attention to what and who he said he was praying for. I didn’t give consideration to what was deeply on his heart about other disciples that he felt the need to take to God in prayer on a regular basis – all to my loss. Yet from Paul we learn a great deal about the need to pray for people’s spiritual needs which often involved growth in Christ, deeper understanding of God’s love, discernment into God’s will, strength to obey God’s word, help with living out the fruits of the Spirit, and gaining the desire to glorify God.

It is important to note that although Paul was always concerned about the physical needs of people, he was also extremely interested in their spiritual well-being. This concern was often seen through the way he valued in prayer his brothers and sisters standing firm and growing during times of suffering and trials rather than taking them out of their trials. Paul was keenly aware of the need to be strengthened and empowered by God’s Spirit to really understand things, have wisdom in making decisions, and even in the ability to really grasp God’s love for us. He was extremely good at spending time not simply in intercession for the Christians’ needs but also of spending time in thanks and gratitude to God for what he saw in them as they followed Christ. I would definitely encourage you to spend some time praying for your fellow brothers and sisters with the same spiritual intentions as Paul. Thank God not just for when he helps them get a good job but when he strengthens them to overcome spiritual challenges in their lives. Pray for character development, fruits of the Spirit, and more of God’s perspective in their lives. And be willing to be a perseverant force of prayer for people when called for, standing in the gap through prayer.

## **Article Thirteen**

In this final article I want to simply hit on a few things about prayer that didn't fit well with the rest of my essay. These things are not in any specific format of importance or to build upon one another but simply a miscellaneous soup of last thoughts in 16 final points.

ONE - SELF SUFFICIENCY: Bounds in his book *Power through Prayer* states, "What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use - men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans but men - men of prayer."<sup>1</sup> This was written in 1978 but I feel applies to us today just as much. We can easily be caught up in all the latest and greatest ideas and methodologies for success in the church and program building and all the things that we humans can do, but so quickly forget the master builder in the process and the power that comes from God. He wasn't interested in the tower of Babel before and I don't think he's interested in it now. Oswald Sanders in his book *Spiritual Leadership* states then quotes from E. M. Bounds, "Great leaders of the Bible were great at prayer. 'They were not leaders because of brilliancy of thought, because they were exhaustless in resources, because of their magnificent culture or native endowment, but because, by the power of prayer, they could command the power of God.'"<sup>2</sup> We must get past ourselves and what we feel WE can do and stay committed to what GOD can do. This is so necessary on the way to spiritual success.

TWO - FASTING: I feel I am not doing the topic of fasting much justice in simply putting it here in a small section at the end, but I would be misguided to not mention the need for this invaluable discipline in regards to calling out to God. Randy McKean in his book *Radical Faith - 10 Faith Steps* reports about fasting, "In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about both prayer and fasting. He introduces both subjects the same in Matthew 6:5 and Matthew 6:16. He says WHEN you pray, not IF you pray. He says WHEN you fast, not IF you fast. There is obviously the expectation to have these regularly in our lives."<sup>3</sup> The idea of making fasting a part of our lives can seem quite challenging, especially if you love eating and not making sacrifices but God created fasting for us, for us to be able to call out to him in a very unique and humble way. McKean goes on to say, "Fasting is a plea to God to listen to our cries. As it is coupled with prayer, it is a demonstration of faith with a big exclamation point. And our faith should be expressed in prayer and, at critical times, in fasting too."<sup>4</sup> Faith, prayer and fasting will always have a connection and as long as we are here on earth, should be a consistent part of our lives.

THREE - INTERCESSION: An area of prayer that can be very easily misunderstood in lieu of every person's free will is prayer of intercession. How can we link other people's

personal freedom, God's will and our ability to affect them both? Steere responds to the question of does prayer change God's will by saying, "God's ultimate purpose is unchanging but God's strategy may vary infinitely."5 And again, "While the ultimate goal of God is constant, the divine strategy of reaching that goal may be swiftly and joyously altered in the light of the occurrence of the costly prayers of committed men and women."6 We need to not overthink what God calls us to do when he says to pray for others. His ways are so above our ways and his ability to keep free will, his will and our intercessory prayers in honest balance will be something we will never be able to fully grasp on this side of eternity, but that's ok! Steere also reports the need to grasp the heart engaging aspects of intercession: "Intercession is the most intensely social act of which the human being is capable. When carried on secretly, it is mercifully preserved from, in fact, almost immunized against, the possible corruptions to which all outer deeds of service for others are subject."7 Let's be a people who engage in prayer for others, let's wrestle in prayer for one another as our great brother Epaphras did (Colossians 4:12) and let's become solid difference makers for those around us.

FOUR - ANSWERS: Another area of interest regards God and his answering of prayer. I believe that when we pray to God a few options are taken by God. He can first of all just dismiss our prayer entirely without even being willing to listen to it (as mentioned in prayer killers section), or he can willingly hear our prayers. If he hears our prayers then his options are to simply say no and that's that or he can answer with a yes to our prayers. If the answer is yes, then the ways he can answer can be yes (the way we asked for him to answer it), yes (but in a different way or method than what we asked for), or yes but not yet (his timing and in his way). I believe that it is important for us to understand these options because if we only think that God answers prayers immediately and only in the way we ask him to then we will have a shaken faith very quickly when he decides otherwise. We will likely mistake his answers for silence and even start to question him and prayer altogether. Be surrendered to letting God answer how and when he wants, remembering he isn't a genie in a bottle or like the ancient deities worshipped by the nations around Israel.

FIVE - HELP: One of the great hallmarks of Paul's prayer life was his willingness to ask others to pray for him. If anyone would seem to not need the prayers of others it would be Paul - a man with great spiritual success, great internal motivation and drive, apostolic ordination, and doer of miracles. Yet Paul was keenly aware of his complete ineptness without the power of God in his life and also the incredible power that all the fellow saints possessed in their abilities to pray to God for his needs and God's respondent assistance. And it wasn't just on a single occasion (Romans 15:30-32; II Corinthians 1:10-11; Ephesians 6:19-20; Philippians 1:19; Colossians 4:3-4; I Thessalonians 5:25) but on many occasions and with many people/churches that he

asked for prayer – a true man of prayer knows from whom and through whom prayer and its power come from and asks accordingly.

SIX - EVERYONE: An area of prayer that we can often neglect and maybe this is due to the distance of connection, distance of relatability, or complete distance of concern would be our need to pray for our leaders (both physical ones in governmental authority and spiritual leaders), our fellow churches (those in our local regions of the world and those on the farthest reaches of other continents) and for our enemies (those directly opposing us or those oppressing others). It can be easy to love (and pray) for those who directly reciprocate this, but what about those who don't know us, don't have concern for us, or even have done malicious things to us? These are people, great and small, far and wide, righteous and evil who are all God's children that he created and desires to love and follow him. These too are people whom Jesus died for, so I find it important to not neglect these people. In our current time (summer 2016) don't forget to pray for our fellow churches in other various nations, don't dismiss praying for your local and national governmental leaders (despite their track records at times), and don't forget to pray for your enemies (like ISIS or other terrorist groups, groups of people whose agendas agitate you, or ...). Nothing has the impact on others, and our hearts as well, as being willing to pray (and by prayer I mean praying for their spiritual wellbeing) with a heart for anyone and everyone. Even though we aren't to love all things that all people do, we are to love all people at all times.

SEVEN - STUDENT: As you gain a desire to understand prayer better, I would suggest becoming a student of prayer and trying to absorb and learn as much as possible. Talk to other people (especially those with a strong healthy prayer life) and get their input and read books about prayer. I would always start with reading the bible for its direction about prayer. But beyond God's Word there are many excellent books on prayer (some of which I have referenced in this essay) and reading more than one is important as you will be able to glean different things from each of them and ultimately become a more well-rounded student of this important topic.

EIGHT - IMITATION: A great area to start when it comes to answering the question of, "How do I know if what I am praying about is truly in line with what I should be praying about?" is to imitate the prayers of the bible. This can happen with imitating *what* these prayers are about and with imitating *for whom and how often* these prayers are given. What you will discover as you examine the prayers of the bible are some incredible consistent themes running through most of them – such things as praying with the goal to bring glory to God and for help in fulfilling God's will through us. It's amazing to me how often we will imitate other people or what a book tells us to pray about, but completely disregard what GOD has to say about it in his book!



NINE - PERSEVERANCE: In our age of fast food, high speed internet, immediate digital connection to anyone/anywhere, and a craving and expectation of all things NOW, the idea of staying in patient, perseverant prayer is hard if not somewhat repulsive to our generation. In Luke 18 Jesus instructs us about the need in prayer to be persistent, to keep praying and keep praying and keep praying. This tireless determination can be very unnatural to many of us. We can struggle with Jesus' teaching here because it takes faith to keep on praying when we don't see immediate answers and it also takes the character of patience to not give up. But how many of our prayers would have been answered if we would have just kept at it, not given up, stayed the course and trusted Jesus' teaching? There is a link between prayer and other Christian characteristics such as faith and patience.

TEN - ACTION: As prayer is designed to be intimately attached to our entire Christian life, this may be no truer than with our need to obey the commands of God and his will for us to actively participate in the gospel. Dean and Kim Farmer in the book *Teach Us To Pray* relate, "But his [Nehemiah] prayers were followed by decisions, plans and actions. God expects us to do his revealed will - saying 'Lord, Lord' is not enough (Matthew 7:21)...What closes God's ears to our prayers is not the depth of our sin, but the lack of eagerness to act upon his Word...To pray for personal fruit without evangelism is a fantasy; to pray for repentance without confession is a fantasy."<sup>8</sup> Praying just to pray with no expectation to go out and act upon our prayers as we are able isn't what God intended with prayer but simply religious self-focus. Other than praying for deep inner needs and connection to God, our prayers are to assist in the doing of Christianity, fulfilling our godly cause as his workmanship (Acts 4:23-31 is a great example of people praying for needed connection with God during a traumatic situation AND praying for the empowerment from God to still go out despite these challenges and do what God wanted them to do).

ELEVEN - BREATHE: I want to make sure that in all this discussion of prayer that you the reader don't get the idea that you will need to go a hundred miles an hour with your head spinning trying to get as much prayer crammed into your life as possible leaving these times of prayer feeling stressed out, out of breath and mentally all over the place. Yes we do need to be a people who devote intensive energy and focus to prayer consistently every day, but with this we must allow the balance of also spending time in these prayers to simply listen. We need to just be quiet, listen and focus on what God wants to tell us. This is different than eastern meditation with the goal being to empty your mind. Godly meditation is designed to empty your mind of all the crazy and busy things that are keeping you from focusing on what God wants you to be thinking about and learning from him. Psalm 19:14 reminds us of the importance to meditate and listen to God as this pleases him. This is true in most relationships as there is very little chance that you are going to learn anything about the person you are

talking with if you are the one doing all the talking but doing no listening; sure, you feel good that you got to talk but you missed out on everything they wanted to tell you. God wants us to listen to him and during times of prayer we need to sometimes just stop talking and just be quiet and listen to God. So many of the insights I have gotten have come from being quiet and just meditating, pondering on God's word or from my prayer. For those of you who are always multitasking with not one single moment of down time I will say: stop, take a breath and give yourself the time you really NEED to just be quiet and meditate on God and what he wants to say.

TWELVE -CPR: If you are anything like me you can easily slip from praying into just mouthing words that sound religious or redundant with no seeming impact other than the fact that you always say them but they don't have any real connection to God. An old saying (I believe from the Quakers) "pray until you pray" has been very helpful for me. I've had times when my prayer life was so stale and lifeless that I had to stay at praying for a long period of time until the rigid shackles of disconnect came off and I was able to breathe again a deep connection with God full of life and faith. We should never settle for anything less than authentic life breathing prayer times with God. So when you feel like you've been in a prayer funk, go out and pray until you're praying and recharge your relationship with God.

THIRTEEN - DISCERNMENT: Praying for God to reveal his will for our lives is a big area that many of us have questions and concerns about and rightfully so! I want to quote a passage from Andrew Murray in his book *With Christ in the School of Prayer* because I feel he does a masterful job of explaining the answer to this question in stating, "It is this union of the teaching of the word and Spirit that many do not understand, and so there is a twofold difficulty in knowing what God's will may be. Some seek the will of God in an inner feeling or conviction, and would have the Spirit lead them without the word. Others seek it in the word, without the living leading of the Holy Spirit. The two must be united: only in the word, only in the Spirit, but in these most surely, can we know the will of God, and learn to pray according to it. In the heart the word and Spirit must meet: it is only by indwelling that we can experience their teaching. The word must dwell, must abide in us: heart and life must day by day be under its influence. Not from without, but from within, comes the quickening of the word by the Spirit. It is only he who yields himself entirely in his whole life to the supremacy of the word and the will of God, who can expect in special cases to discern what the word and will permit him boldly to ask. And even as with the word, just so with the Spirit: if I would have the leading of the Spirit in prayer to assure me what God's will is, my whole life must be yielded to that leading; so only can mind and heart become spiritual and capable of knowing God's holy will. It is he who, through word and spirit, *lives in the will* of God by doing it, who will know to pray according to that will in the confidence that He hears us."9 We must never assume that we can pray and

get God's answer to the will for our lives if we don't have any desire to live out his commands as his disciples or have any real grasp of his word and desire to obey it best we can. God's Spirit wants to lead us with his fire, his passion to live out the Father's general will as spelled out in the bible in specific practical ways in our personal life. Don't put out the Spirit's prompting with selfish desires but instead fan the flame of the Spirit's fire with God-glorifying desires!

**FOURTEEN - BIG PICTURE:** God's will when we pray is to have an overriding sense of all the amazing things we have to be grateful for. Sure we have plenty of challenges, shortcomings, failures, and discouragements, but at the end of the day when we look at the big eternal picture our things to be thankful for far outweigh our negative issues. As I Thessalonians 5:16-18 teach us, continual prayer that is seasoned consistently with the things we have to be thankful for not only pleases God but also can bring us the joy we are to have in our lives not as rare occurrences but as the norm. Expecting to be joyful without praying and giving God thanks is short sighted and actually just humanistic. If you tend to default to seeing life as a cup half empty (like myself) then the value of following this passage in your conversations with God is invaluable.

**FIFTEEN - REFRESHMENT:** An area that I touched on in an earlier article is the need to have times in prayer when we confess our specific sins to God. In Ezra 10:1 we see an incredible example of a man not just speaking to God words of confession but being emotionally engaged in this time. He was so deeply moved in this time that others around him were impacted and wept themselves. He wasn't concerned about how he may look or how uncomfortable this confession may feel. When we pray to God and have intimate times of confession, don't be afraid of emotion or allow yourself to stay guarded but let God move you. Let him move you deeply and passionately to change, to have a motivation and strengthening to repent that you would not otherwise have had. Godly sorrow can't come if we stubbornly remain stoic in times of confession. Ezra wasn't perfect and we aren't either. Sometimes our hearts need to feel the sting of shame and cutting pain from offending God to reawaken our hearts through repentance and therefore to be able to experience the refreshment we need (Acts 3:19) that only God can provide.

**SIXTEEN - TOGETHER:** Lastly in this miscellaneous section I want to mention the need to pray not just alone as many of us do most of the time, but with others. In the bible we see times when people were often praying together, lifting their hearts and voices as one to God. Spending time in prayer to God with others is very encouraging, faith building, and is a great demonstrated example in the bible. Often we can spend time with other Christians doing about everything but praying. We get together for bible study, worship, fellowship and enjoying each other's company. But often we don't come together with the primary purpose to pray. This may go back to what we have

been talking about in this essay in regards to prayer and our need to understand it better, enjoy it more, and grasp the incredible power that we have in this connection with God. I can tell you from personal experience that at first initiating prayer with others can feel awkward, but with more and more times together it becomes more natural and spiritually fulfilling, and ultimately very powerful as voices and hearts are united together in prayer.

## **Article Fourteen**

I want to finish this essay by giving you my advice for moving on from here. If you are reading this last part it means that you were willing to slog along reading my entire essay – that must have been painstakingly difficult but hopefully not too boring! But with the amount of information given I don't want you to leave feeling overwhelmed but encouraged. I want you to see the opportunities you have to take your prayer life with God to amazing heights. I want you to have determination to dig into your bible and look at prayer with a learner's heart. I want you to gain the faith that God wants to work through you and your prayers. I also want to recommend that you don't try to or expect to change everything at one time. Pick one area and work on that, then as you have victory there, move on to another area. Make your focus growing in prayer not graduating in prayer. We will all be growing in our prayer life and relationship with God for the rest of our lives. And lastly, I want to encourage you to keep at prayer, don't quit advancing in this absolutely vital area of your Christianity. If you get discouraged, don't quit. If you are having victories in prayer and your relationship with God is becoming increasingly healthy, don't quit. If you are finding it difficult to find time to pray with stressful life issues, don't quit. And if you become successful at certain spiritual activities, don't become humanistic, continue to pray and don't ever quit.

## **End Notes**

### Article One

1. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 8.
2. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 9.
3. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 96.

4. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 212.

#### Article Three

1. Thomas and Sheila Jones, *Teach Us To Pray* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 34.
2. Thomas and Sheila Jones, *Teach Us To Pray* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 47.

#### Article Four

1. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 49.
2. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 28.
3. Thomas and Sheila Jones, *Teach Us To Pray* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 17-19.

#### Article Five

1. Bill Hybels, *Too Busy NOT To Pray* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 66.

#### Article Six

1. Bill Hybels, *Too Busy NOT To Pray* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 92.
2. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 29.
3. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 101.

#### Article Seven

1. Randy McKean, *Radical Faith – 10 Faith Secrets* (Spring, Texas: Illumination Publishers, 2015), 91.
2. Mark Templer, *The Prayer of the Righteous* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 105.

3. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 209.

#### Article Eight

1. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 19.
2. Mark Templer, *The Prayer of the Righteous* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 80.

#### Article Nine

1. Bill Hybels, *Too Busy NOT To Pray* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 145.

#### Article Ten

1. Randy McKean, *Radical Faith – 10 Faith Secrets* (Spring, Texas: Illumination Publishers, 2015), 91.
2. Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries* (Minneapolis: Bethany Press International, 1959), 152.
3. Bill Hybels, *Too Busy NOT To Pray* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 126.
4. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 114.
5. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 42.
6. D.A. Carson, *A Call To Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1992), 121.

#### Article Twelve

1. Douglas Jacoby, *Reading, Praying & Living THE PSALMS* (Spring, Texas: Illumination Publishers International), MP3 Audio, ISBN 0-9767583-8-5.
2. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 136.
3. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 138.

## Article Thirteen

1. E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 12.
2. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles Of Excellence For Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 92. He quotes from E.M. Bounds in his book *Prayer and Praying Men* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921).
3. Randy McKean, *Radical Faith – 10 Faith Secrets* (Spring, Texas: Illumination Publishers, 2015), 89.
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5. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 63.
6. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 69.
7. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer: Cultivating a Relationship with God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 67.
8. Thomas and Sheila Jones, *Teach Us To Pray* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 2000), 51.
9. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Jove Publications, Inc. for Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), 164-165.