

Walking *the Path of* Prayer

10 Steps *to* Reaching
the Heart of God

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Chosen

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Previously published as part of *The Power and Blessing* by Victor Books in 1994; also appeared in the 2011 edition of *Living the Spirit-Formed Life* published by Regal Books

Published by Chosen Books
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.chosenbooks.com

Chosen Books is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-8007-9915-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2018019479

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Cover design by Emily Weigel

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If man is man and God is God, to live without prayer is not merely an awful thing; it is an infinitely foolish thing.

Phillips Brooks
Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts
1835–1893

Contents

Above and beneath It All: *Walking
the Path of Prayer* 9

- Step 1: Confident Faith 13
- Step 2: Transforming Faith 21
- Step 3: Responsible Faith 29
- Step 4: Dependent Faith 37
- Step 5: Releasing Faith 43
- Step 6: Obedient Faith 51
- Step 7: Trusting Faith 57
- Step 8: Jesus' Lessons on Bold Faith 65
- Step 9: Prayer That Intervenes and Reverses 81
- Step 10: The Practice of Fasting 103
- Personal Prayer Journal 119

Above and beneath It All

Walking the Path of Prayer

“In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

Matthew 6:9–13

The aged apostle Paul, as he concluded one of his letters, gave a series of concise commands summarizing essentials for disciples (see

1 Thessalonians 5:12–27). One of them was, “Pray without ceasing” (v. 17).

Whatever else may be said about living as a disciple of Jesus Christ, about walking with Him by faith and in love through trial and in power, clearly prayer is the one discipline above and beneath all others.

I have heard it said that more books have been written on the subject of prayer than on any other worthwhile theme occupying human inquiry or aspiration. Few thinking persons deny there is *something* to this practice. This has often been true even when the person denies there is someone there to whom prayer may be offered.

Prayer is a word and idea used by the materialist and the Eastern mystic to describe quiet creative reasoning or “transcendent” meditation. Still others characterize prayer as anything from describing a good feeling (toward a cause or person) to an impassioned cry for help from “whoever’s out there.”

At a fuller, deeper dimension for the disciple of Jesus, prayer is person-to-Person communication — a combination of worship, fellowship and intercession:

- *Worship* through adoration, praise and thanksgiving to God

- *Fellowship* through devotion, communion and conversation *with* God
- *Intercession* through supplication, fasting and spiritual warfare *before* God

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit” is a phrase inclusively covering this triad of prayer, one Paul enunciates in his concluding appeal to the Ephesians (6:18). The NIV reads “all *kinds* of prayers,” a worthy translation that points us to a learning path of applied growth in understanding the *means* and *methods* of prayer.

The Bible’s call to prayer is not a call to the mystical or the theoretical; rather, the pathway of prayer is preeminently learnable. It is not intended to be mysterious, but instead, always practical.

Starting with seven basic steps of prayer as outlined by Jesus when instructing His disciples *how* to pray, we will conclude with three keys to effective asking *in* prayer and attacking *through* prayer. Throughout we shall move toward applying the one constant the Bible teaches the earnest disciple: “Pray without ceasing.”

To learn to live in the spirit of prayer is to learn to walk in the presence of Jesus. Always.

Wherever . . . thou shalt be, pray
secretly within thyself. If thou
shalt be far from a house of prayer, give not
thyself trouble to seek for one, for thou thy-
self art a sanctuary designed for prayer. If
thou shalt be in bed, or in any other place,
pray there; thy temple is there.

St. Bernard
Abbot of Clairvaux
1091–1153

Step 1

Confident Faith

You are all sons of light and sons of the day.
We are not of the night nor of darkness.

1 Thessalonians 5:5

Nothing is more crippling to effective prayer than not having confidence in our relationship with God. When Jesus refers to God as the Father, He helps us to understand the glorious relationship we are intended to have with Him.

“Our Father in Heaven”

“In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name” (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus opens His teaching on prayer with an emphasis on our relationship with God as our Father. In doing so, He establishes the foundational truth that we are given grounds for confidence in prayer on the strength of a Father-child relationship, which the Bible says is established and secured through Christ: “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 John 5:14–15).

Unfortunately, the concept of “father” has been marred for many through disappointing earthly relationships with parents or other authority figures. Because of this all-too-common human fact, Jesus made a point to show us the Father in a way no one else ever could. For in Christ Himself we see that God is a Father who transcends even the finest earthly father; He is able to redeem us from the broken images or painful memories of our lives. As we follow Christ’s teachings about the Father and see how He showed us the Father in His life, we come to understand the power of His words to Philip: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

The Story of the Prodigal Son

In Luke 15, Jesus uses the story of the prodigal son to paint a magnificent picture of what our Father God is really like. Here is a young man who wasted everything he had been given—his inheritance, his opportunities and his father’s trust. He ended up working in a pigpen in a foreign land. But in unfolding this story, Jesus unveils God’s heart toward each of us through five essential phrases. He shows that, regardless of what we have wasted, God’s arms are still reaching toward us, openly and lovingly.

The first thing we learn about is God’s *quest* for us. The father saw his prodigal son, who was still “a great way off” (v. 20). This shows us something unique and precious about the longing heart of God. As the father watched for his wayward son, so God’s heart yearns and watches for each of us, even when we are far away from Him. In other words, regardless of what we have done or where we are, God loves us.

Second, we see that when the father saw the son heading home, he “had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him” (v. 20)—he *received* his son. The verb tense used here to say he “embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20 NASB)

is literally translated from the phrase “kissed him repeatedly.” I have often reflected on this story, thinking about the reluctance the son must have felt as he drew closer and closer to home. He must have been uneasy about his return, feeling very unworthy. He had squandered his resources, wasted his entire inheritance and nearly lost his life. He had every reason to doubt that his father would take him back. But Jesus describes God’s open heart toward us by showing how the young man’s father welcomed him. The father cried, “My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (v. 24). He must have received his wandering son with much the same joy that he had when he first embraced the son at his birth. It was as though his son was being born all over again. And in this same way, God receives us with joy.

Third, after this loving reception, the father called for the finest robe to be given to his son (see v. 22). The particular style of robe referred to was full length in cut—a garment reserved in those days for one who held a position of honor and prestige. So it is clear that this fallen son was being *restored* to his former position as an heir in the household. The privileges of relationship with his father were returned to him, even though he had lost the inheritance he had been given. Likewise, God not

only receives us as forgiven sons and daughters, but He also restores us from the losses of our past. Although we may have abandoned the gifts He first gave us, He welcomes us back with a loving embrace and brings us again into our intended place in His will and purposes.

Fourth, the father had a signet ring put on his son's finger (see v. 22). How the hearts of those listening to this story for the first time must have leapt when Jesus related this part! They would have recognized instantly the significance of this action, for in ancient times the giving of such a ring indicated the son's full return to partnership with his father in the family's business. The ring gave him the right to exercise authority in all commercial or legal matters, for it represented the full weight of whatever authority or power that family's name carried. Thus, in calling us to pray to "our Father," Jesus shows that God invites us to let Him *authorize us as His partner*. Our prayer in the family name of Jesus is authoritative prayer. And that name is given to us freely and fully, carrying with it all the rights and privileges granted to members of God's eternal family.

Fifth, the father had shoes or sandals placed on his son's feet (see v. 22). These shoes were more than mere clothing. Old Testament imagery teaches

that people in mourning had the custom of removing their shoes as a symbol of their sorrow or grief. By placing shoes on his son's feet, the father was making an announcement to his son: *The time of mourning and the days of separation are over! The time of rejoicing has come!* In this action we see the teaching of God's heart toward us: *God rejoices over us!* He rejoices at our return and at the restored relationship we share with Him (see Zephaniah 3:17).

Through the story of the prodigal son, Jesus illustrates our standing before God: We are welcomed to a place of confidence through the forgiveness given to us through Christ. Our Father offers us an authoritative right to be sons (see John 1:12), to function in partnership with Him and to extend His dominion over all the earth. No matter what we fight, whether the powers of hell or our own weaknesses, eventual victory will be ours.

This is what Jesus wants to teach us when He instructs us to pray, "Our Father in heaven." He is founding all prayer on a growing relationship with a loving God. And as the truth of God's reception and our restoration fills us, we will discover yet another benefit: We will learn to receive each other. We begin, with Christ's help, to see one another as brothers and sisters who have been received by a loving Father. And in that light, we cannot help

Confident Faith

but join together in harmony, lifting up a concert of powerful, effective prayer as people who have discovered God's love and who are learning to pray confidently in Him.

All who call on God in true faith,
earnestly from the heart, will cer-
tainly be heard, and will receive what they
have asked and desired, although not in the
hour or in the measure, or the very thing
which they ask; yet they will obtain some-
thing greater and more glorious than they
had dared to ask.

Martin Luther
1483–1546