

Chapter 8

Types of Prayer November 3, 1996

We have considered the “parts” of prayer and then took a look at last Lord’s Day evening at the Lord’s Prayer, the model prayer, especially the model petitionary prayer, the Lord Jesus gave us for our instruction in the “what” of prayer.

Tonight we move on to consider the “types” of prayer, or, the “when and to what extent” of prayer. The Bible shows us, both in its teaching about prayer and in its many illustrations of people praying, a variety of types or kinds of prayers, all of which are to be a part of the life of prayer of any faithful Christian.

I. First, there are what we can call, for want of a better term, “Deliberate Prayers.”

These are prayers that you set out to pray in some regular and intentional way.

1. First among these deliberate prayers are prayers that we pray according to some schedule that we have established for ourselves.
 - (a) Prayers at table; with our children at bedtime; with our wives or husbands.
 - (b) Closet prayers at whatever time.

- i. Daniel 6:10: 3x per day
- ii. Ps. 119:62: “At midnight I rise to give you thanks. . .” [The practice of Hudson Taylor: I remember reading that he used to get up in the very early morning to pray — the quietest time of day -and then return to bed.]
- iii. Ps. 119:164: “Seven times a day I praise you. . .”

At the opening of his Private Devotions, Lancelot Andrewes offers a summary of specific times set aside for prayer that are mentioned in regard to various individuals throughout the Bible. Isaac went out to pray at evening; David variously, “evening, morning, and noon” and “at dawn;” Jesus “early in the morning, a great while before day;” Peter “at the third hour of the day (Acts 2);” “at the sixth hour (Acts 10);” and, in the company of John, “at the hour of prayer, the ninth (Acts 3).”

Alexander Whyte, in his great work, Lord Teach us to Pray, calls these set hours of prayer an “horology,” though he admits that this is not a definition of that word that is ever given in a dictionary. The word “horology” comes from the Greek word for “hour” and means “the science or art of measuring time or making time-pieces.” Well, said Whyte, we all ought to be horologists in the matter of prayer, and have our hours and keep our hours of prayer every day. And the reason is simply this, that it is far too easy, as we all know, to let our hours slip away without actually praying at all, or at least hardly praying at all. And so wise men and women, through the ages, have set their hours of prayer because they wanted to be and knew they needed to be men and women of prayer. They took steps to ensure that this work was not neglected. They set their hours. There is no set time or times prescribed in the Bible, but we certainly gain the impression that there is a great importance attached to the regular discipline of daily, scheduled prayer.

- 2. Among the deliberate prayers are also prayers that are offered occasionally, as particular circumstances require, but are offered with consideration and plan.
 - (a) Hannah’s prayer for a child; or David for the life of his child;

- (b) Nehemiah's fasting and prayer for Israel's return to Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1;
- (c) Paul's prayers for particular situations in his churches;
- (d) Many of the psalms are such prayers;
- (e) Our Savior's prayers for his disciples, such as the "High Priestly Prayer."

An excellent example of such prayers as these is John Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and several Steps in my Sicknes, a work that was of immense importance and benefit to my sister through the last two years of her life and one through which she often found the Lord speaking directly and wonderfully to her.

Shortly after being made Dean of St. Paul's, Donne became gravely ill and for quite some time it was thought that he would not survive. During that time Donne turned his sickness in its varying stages into meditation, expostulation (or a debate or discussion with God about his circumstances) and prayer. He did this while he was ill, his mind remaining clear, for which many subsequent generations of Christians have had reason to be grateful. He broke up his time of sickness into 23 separate stages — with each stage having a meditation concerning his condition and what it meant, a discussion with God, and a prayer to God. The first stage he calls "The first grudging (or sign) of illness;" the third "The Patient takes his Bed," the fourth "The Physician is sent for;" the sixth "The Physician is afraid;" the fifteenth "I sleep not day or night;" the seventeenth, "Now this bell, tolling softly for another, says to me, Thou must die;" the twenty-first "God prospers [the physicians'] practice, and he, by them, calls Lazarus out of his tomb, me out of my bed;" and the twenty-third "They warn me of the fearful danger of relapsing."

In other words, at each new stage in his illness he took his condition and his situation and his fears and his faith to God in prayer. As the situation changed, new prayers were called for: Deliberate prayers concerning the circumstances of his life those particular days and in the particular condition he found himself in.

And we can think of countless examples of such prayers as might fill up our lives in the same way: sickness as well, of course (and particularly

serious illness: for healing, for faith and godliness in pain and sorrow; and when there is reason to believe that God has sent the disease that will bring our life on earth to its end, for hope, for joy, for the strength to die well); for our life of work (where and what; for workmates and their salvation; for our own witness and character before others, etc.); for the spiritual life and growth of our children; for the brethren in our church; for our nation at times of crisis, at political crossroads, such as face us this week; for love, for the particular love of a particular person.

I was reading recently again in the biography of Henry Martyn, the great missionary to India and to the Muslim world. Now Martyn was a man of prayer. He prayed deliberate prayers for all kinds of things. Indeed, if he felt that his heart was growing cold to the things of God, he would set out to spend a day in prayer for the restoration of his own soul. In one instance he writes:

“My views of eternity are become dim and transient. I could live for ever in prayer, if I could always speak to God. I sought to pause, and to consider what I wanted, and to look up with fear and faith, and I found the benefit; for my soul was soon composed to that devout society, which I knew, by its sweetness, to be its proper frame. I was engaged in prayer, in the manner I like — deep seriousness; at the end of it, I felt great fear of forgetting the presence of God, and of leaving Him soon as I should leave the posture of devotion. I was led through the mists of unbelief, and spake to God as one that was true; and rejoiced exceedingly that He was holy and faithful. I endeavoured to consider myself as being alone on the earth with Him, and that greatly prompted my approach to his presence. My prayer for a meek and holy sobriety was granted. Oh how sweet the dawn of heaven!” [p. 57]

But, I was speaking about praying for love. When Henry Martyn left for India he was in love with a Lydia Genfell, but felt strongly that he could not fulfill his calling in India as a married man. From his correspondence you get very strongly the sense of inner turmoil in which he left this young woman, certainly aware that he might never see her again. In any event, when he

got to India he came gradually to change his mind; other missionaries were married and he saw the benefit of it. And so he wrote to her indicating that he felt free to marry and asking for her hand. That letter was dated July 30th, 1806. Mail took a long time in those days and he was not to hear back from her until October of 1807. She had gotten his letter in March of 1807, seven months after he had written it!

All through those long months he prayed deliberate prayers, that the letter would reach her quickly, that she would say yes, that the news would come back to him that she was already making plans to join him, etc. When finally the letter from her arrived, however, it was a refusal, apparently in the chief part because of the refusal of her parents, especially her mother, to give consent. And then more prayers, that somehow the situation might be reversed, etc. A few years later he began a slow trip home, overland through Persia, where he translated the NT into Persian and has his famous interviews with Muslim leaders. Continuing on toward Constantinople, he fell ill and died. His deliberate prayers for love were answered, but in a different way than he had hoped.

Our lives should be full every day of deliberate prayers.

II. Second, in addition to deliberate prayers, there are also momentary prayers, called from us by the need or the thought or the gratitude of a sudden.

1. In our works of Practical Theology these are known as the “preces ejaculatoriae,” i.e. “the arrow prayers” (from the Latin *jaculum* or *dart*, because these are prayers that dart upward to heaven. These are prayers that are shot up to heaven like an arrow from a bow, or like a spear from a soldier’s hand.
2. There are a number of these in the Bible. *Turn up some!*
 - (a) Nehemiah 2:4 (his prayer between the King asking him what he wanted and his replying to the King’s question);
 - (b) Exodus 34:8 (Moses bowed down “at once” after the Lord revealed his glory to him, and prayed that God would go with Israel and forgive her recent rebellion); In the KJV it read, “Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth...”

- (c) Abraham’s servant at the well of Nahor (when seeking a bride for Isaac): “Before I finished praying in my heart, Rebecca came out. . . .”
- (d) The Lord’s prayer to his Father (Luke 10:21) upon the return of the 72 disciples and their excited account to him of the power they exercised in preaching and in healing: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”
- (e) The Lord’s cries from the cross: “My God, My God. . . .” “Father, forgive them;” “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.”

Thomas Browne, the Anglican mystic, the physician who wrote the famous work Religio Medici, The Religion of a Doctor, it is said that when driving through the streets of Norwich to visit his patients, never passed a church of any denomination without lifting his hat and praying for the minister and people of that church.

That is the idea — everything turned quickly into prayer. Every time you hear the Lord’s name, call upon him; every time the clock strikes and the passage of time is remembered, call upon him—not at length, only in that moment—; when the name of another is mentioned, a brief mention of that name at the Right Hand; when a temptation is encountered, right away to God; when a piece of bad news or of good news, right away to the one who has ordered all things for you; when you feel a headache coming on or stub your toe, when you are about to enter on some entertainment, again, right away, if only for the briefest moment, take yourself to God in prayer and ask him to sanctify all of this to you and make his name great in your heart and life. The Righteous through the ages will all tell you that when you begin to pray this way, your life will change, and it will continue to change for the better as long as you pray this way more and more. It is not a great effort that is required, only the forming of this habit of arrow prayers.

Now, if somehow these prayers could be charted on a map, lines shooting up from heaven to earth from every little village, every large city, from cars and beds and factory floors, shooting up then disappearing and then another

shooting up behind — what would we see. Prayers constantly rising up to heaven and showers of answers falling from heaven to earth in reply.

When Paul commands us to “pray without ceasing” in 1 Thess. 5:17, at the last this is what he means. Our daily living is to be filled up with prayer: all kinds of prayers, set and deliberate prayers offered by a daily schedule for that which it is our regular business to pray and, as well, prayers shooting up to heaven all the time, at any number of specific moments during the day, until our entire life is shot through with prayer.

It is also not difficult to see how praying the one kind of prayer will greatly help to keep the mind and heart in a frame to think to pray the other kinds of prayers as well. Until finally our life is so shot through with prayer that we have attained to the full stature of Christian godliness, a life that is lived in constant communion with and active dependence upon God. Finally life will be prayer and prayer will be life. *Laborare est orare!*

Now, I do accept that by dint of personal capacity, the schedule of life, the measure of one’s health, and so on, Christians may be better at one kind of prayer than another, may even sort of specialize in one kind of prayer or another. Some are quite capable of long periods of concentrated attention in prayer to God; others struggle all their lives to pray at greater length without loss of concentration. On Aug. 25, 1849, Andrew Bonar confessed to his Diary “Let to think today that my way of praying is chiefly to be by bolts upward, not by very long prayers at one time.” The real issue is not what type of prayer is your chief method, but that you are praying without ceasing.