

“A Christian’s Books” No. 9 Prayer
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As I write this installment in the continuing series of articles on recommended reading for Christians I am dealing with the subject of prayer in our Lord’s Day evening series on the Disciplines of the Christian Life. It occurred to me that there is a vast library of books on prayer and that, in my own case, reading those books at different times of my life was a great encouragement to me in the life of prayer. As you may know all Christians have not thought about prayer in the same way, nor have they practiced prayer in the same way. The medieval monk’s prayer was not the prayer of an evangelical Protestant. The most popular book on prayer in recent times is Bruce Wilkinson’s phenomenally successful *The Prayer of Jabez*. As you know, many evangelicals were sharply critical of that book. The criticism illustrated the fact that differences in the nature and practice of prayer often reveal deeper disagreements. Such differences and disagreements are often reflected in the prayers of the Lord’s Day services. In Puritan worship and in 19th century Presbyterian worship the pastor prayed at length. Ministers were judged on the quality of their half-hour long pastoral prayers! In the spiritual cultures nurtured in such services, it was expected that individuals would pray at length every day. In other communions the prayers of the Lord’s Day service are much shorter and in those communions shorter prayers tend to be the rule for private devotion as well. Christians can easily come to feel that one kind of praying is much more spiritual than another! Our pastor in Aberdeen, Scotland prayed quite long prayers in Lord’s Day worship and superintended a three-hour-long prayer meeting every Saturday night! No one could ever accuse him of not being a man of prayer; but he raised eyebrows once by saying that most of his praying he did in church. We have different expectations regarding what constitutes the life of prayer.

And there are certainly different methods recommended. Luther, in his *A Simple Way to Pray*, proposed praying using the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Psalms, among other texts, as outlines. We evangelicals are more familiar with the acronym ACTS. Our prayers should contain, in turn, Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (Petition). Isaac Watts proposed that faithful prayer would include nine elements.

Call upon God, adore and confess,
Petition, plead, and then declare
You are the Lord’s; give thanks and bless
And let “Amen” confirm the prayer.

Different as plans for prayer may be, so are the books on prayer that Christians have treasured through the years.

The first class of such books is of books not about prayer but collections of actual prayers. Of course a manual of worship such as the *Book of Common Prayer* is such a book and many fine Christians, of all sorts, have found praying through such a manual a

fine way to order their daily prayers. I remember reading in Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy* that it was their custom as man and wife to read the prayers of the *Book* morning and evening on their knees and hand in hand. There are many other published collections of prayers. A popular title some years ago was *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*. It includes prayers he offered as the pastor of three different congregations and prayers he offered as the chaplain of the United States Senate from 1947 to 1949. Those senate prayers were national news in those days! It is to take a journey to another time to read those prayers: they are so explicitly Christian and biblical and each ends in the name of Jesus Christ. Let me mention just two others. Originating as a journal of his private prayer is the *Private Devotions* of Lancelot Andrewes, the 16th and 17th century Anglican and translator of the King James Bible. Alexander Whyte produced a translation from Andrewes' Greek and Latin text and here you will find daily prayers and prayers for special occasions. Andrewes is deep! The other is *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*. The prayers are arranged by subject. There is wonderful enrichment for your prayer life to be found in books like these, though, of course, as we are taught in the Bible, each of us must talk to the Lord as well about the specific circumstances of our lives and pray specifically for our own needs and those of others we know. We cannot rely entirely, even mostly on prayers written by others.

There are great books devoted to particular prayers in the Bible. There are studies of the Lord's Prayer, of the Lord's High Priestly prayer, and so on. There are studies of the Psalms as prayers. Valuable among the latter is C.S. Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms*. His chapter on "Praise" will encourage you to put more of that in your prayer!

Then there are general studies of prayer. Popular for a century among British and American evangelicals have been the books of E.M. Bounds, a 19th century Methodist minister who wrote many books on prayer, a number of which have remained in print almost continuously, such as *Power in Prayer* and *The Necessity of Prayer*. More popular still in our circles has been the South African Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Such books as these serve us primarily as inspiration for the life of prayer. Alexander Whyte preached a series of sermons, beginning in 1895, on Luke 11:1 and the disciple's request of Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray..." In each sermon some other biblical text would be added to Luke 11:1 to illustrate some aspect of biblical prayer. Many of these sermons were later published in a book entitled, naturally, *Lord Teach us to Pray*. This is my favorite book on prayer and the one I have learned the most from. I cannot recommend it highly enough. This is the great preacher at his best and in these sermons he not only inspires but instructs, often in the most delightfully practical ways. He identifies our problems and poses helpful solutions. You will be very glad to have read it.

Several 20th century books on prayer are very fine and likely to take their place in the library of great books on the life of prayer. The first is the English Congregationalist P.T. Forsyth's *The Soul of Prayer*, full of suggestive comment. The second is Lewis' justly famous *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer*.

Without a doubt our chief challenge in respect of the life of prayer is truly to believe that prayer *works*; that it changes things; that our prayers will be heard and answered. A hymn

we often sing includes the petition that we might be learn “the patience of unanswered prayer.” Too often we find ourselves instead growing in discouragement when our prayers are not answered. A superb antidote to that discouragement is Thomas Goodwin’s *The Return of Prayers*. Goodwin teaches us carefully to attend to the answer given to our prayers. Too often God’s answers remain unnoticed by those who pray. Goodwin will assure you that all your prayers are answered and will teach you how to identify the answer God has given. I have never forgotten these sentences since I first read them years ago:

“The reason you pray so much, and give thanks so little is, that you observe not God’s answers; you do not study them. When we have put up a faithful prayer, God is made our debtor by promise, and we are to take notice of his payment, and give him an acknowledgement of the receipt of it...”