

Remedies for Problems in Prayer

By Dr Peter Masters

Christian Life | *The Sword & Trowel*

June 2016

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him (Genesis 32.24-25).

VARIOUS TROUBLES may be experienced from time to time by believers in their life of prayer, and pastors are not excepted. Here are a number of such problems for which solutions will be suggested in this chapter. (We have not included the possibility of hardness of heart resulting from unrepented of serious sin.)

- (1) An inability to pray effectually due to lack of assurance.
- (2) Coldness of heart, or a lack of desire or enthusiasm (in an otherwise earnest believer).
- (3) A strange loss of any sense of a real engagement with God.
- (4) Straying thoughts, or short concentration span, or tiredness, often only occurring when in prayer.
- (5) Worries crowding in and overpowering prayer.
- (6) Forgetfulness of concerns.
- (7) A mechanical tendency to pray in the same words for the same things.
- (8) The ability to plead fervently undermined by the thought of God's predestination of all things.
- (9) The intrusion of anger or resentment over wrongs.
- (10) Excessive emotion overtaking prayer and impairing thought.

Praying When Feelings Fail

Let us first take a family of problems, such as lack of assurance, coldness in prayer, little sense of God, and small desire to pray. For a solution we may go to that most famous of texts for troubled minds – *Isaiah 50.10* – ‘Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and [yet] hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.’

These words warn that there will be times when feelings, including any clear sense of assurance, will desert a believer, but the instruction of the Lord is that this does not prevent faith and prayer, and therefore we should keep up our spiritual duties, trusting in the name of the Lord and leaning upon our God. In effect, the verse says – ‘Your emotional system is no longer co-operating, so that you cannot feel as you would like to do. The enemy of your soul is probably taking advantage of this and is attacking you, but this does not disqualify your prayer.’ In these circumstances, as we have advised earlier in these pages, you should come before the Lord without the help or co-operation of feelings, and use your mind alone, falling back on faith only. If you cannot pray with your head and heart –together, you must pray with your head only. When emotions are unresponsive, you may feel you have changed, but God has not changed, and the same gracious God Who hears and answers the prayers of His people will hear you. You must trust Him. That is the counsel of *Isaiah 50.10*.

Once we accept that legitimate prayer may be made with only the mind functioning we will find it easier to pray. Once we realise that prayer does not depend upon a sense of assurance, nor even a sensed engagement with God, we are able to get down to the task. It may even be that this

is the kind of prayer with which God is most pleased. We remember Satan's claim that Job did not serve God for nothing, and if his blessings were removed his insincerity would be exposed. The Lord allowed Job's blessings to be withdrawn, but Job never abandoned his belief in the Lord. Certainly, he voiced many unworthy complaints, and behaved insolently toward God, but –always his pre-occupying concern was to find why God dealt with him as He did, and never to deny Him. Satan was proved wrong.

'Raw' faith

Satan is convinced that we too serve God only while good feelings are present. The Lord, in a sense, replies in *Isaiah 50.10* saying, 'My servant will seek Me even if his mind is all that is left to him. He will take full advantage of it and will pray with that alone.' Satan will be proved wrong in our case also if we keep up prayer regardless of how we feel. God looks upon us with special pleasure when we press on and pray without the help of sensed assurance and warm feelings, for this is 'raw' faith, unassisted and unadorned by secondary comforts. Therefore we should summon all our mental powers to engage in a full programme of praise and prayer, theoretical as it may feel, trusting that God will in due time restore the heart to feel.

We are also helped to pray by the realisation that failure to pray steals praise from God, depriving Him of His due. We may not feel as we would like to, but we still owe Him a debt of thanksgiving and worship and must not deny Him that. Even if praise is rendered with the mind only, it is entirely valid and acceptable before God, because the mind is the most important department of the soul, and the palace of faith.

Prayer Troubles in the Psalms

When we pray with the mind alone, the heart often responds, as we see in the examples of prayer in the *Psalms*. Some haunting words of David in *Psalms 13* show his sad heart melting following an emphatic affirmation of God's faithfulness, with the result that the shadows lifted, and assurance returned. Isaac Watts puts the sense of David's words into a magnificent hymn of experience:

How long wilt Thou conceal Thy face?

My God, how long delay?

When shall I feel those heavenly rays

That chase my fears away?

See how the prince of darkness tries

All his malicious arts:

He spreads a mist around my eyes,

And throws his fiery darts.

How would the tempter boast aloud

If I became his prey!

And how the sons of earth grow proud

At Thy so long delay.

But hell shall fly at Thy rebuke,

And Satan hide his head;

He knows the terrors of Thy look,

And hears Thy voice with dread.

Thou wilt display that sovereign grace

Where all my hopes have hung:

I shall employ my heart in praise,

And victory shall be sung.

By the end of the psalm, praise is again on David's lips, and we should learn that to recount God's goodness, and to affirm His mercies, even when we *feel* little, often leads to a good measure of returning joy.

In *Psalms 56* David follows the same procedure, expressing his trust in God in the darkest circumstances, reflecting on the goodness of the Lord and His Word, and subsequently finding his feelings joining with his mind. The psalmist's words in *Psalms 61* ring true for all believers at some time – 'When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I.' Once again, reflection, affirmation and thanksgiving soon lift the psalmist in heart.

Psalms 42 – unascribed – is a great example of how a clear affirmation in prayer of our belief in God's faithfulness can lift our spirits, and Asaph's *Psalms 77* also demonstrates the value of praise to rekindle dormant feelings. We should review and rehearse in praise all our blessings, as well as God's supreme goodness, and never lapse into forlorn prayerlessness.

To the exercise of praise we add two further measures for coldness of heart, the first being the practice of reviewing in detail the many significant answers to prayer which the Lord has given in past weeks – even months and years. We should press the mind to go back and acknowledge the ways of God, and thank Him. It may be helpful to put a list of significant answers in writing, so that these can be called to mind readily in prayer.

Earlier in this book we mentioned one remedy for 'feelings' problems, which is to put intercession first in our prayers. If we are cold and spiritually detached when we go to pray, to plead for others makes us less concerned about our own feelings and trials, and more focused on their spiritual needs, and this often helps us to regain fervour of heart. Our ministry of intercession is not only a means of blessing to others, but a means of blessing to us also.

Remedies for Mental Tiredness

What can be done when tiredness, short concentration span, or forgetfulness strike the time of prayer? The most obvious remedy is to pray more briefly, more often. We should pray several times in the day as opportunity arises, and make greater use of 'emergency' prayers of a few sentences, as occasion requires. Multiple prayer is mentioned by David in *Psalms 55* (one of his psalms of distress) – 'Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray' (v 17). Frequency in prayer definitely helps one over the tiredness problem.

Roaming thoughts and lack of concentration can also be countered by breaking up a prayer time into portions. When thoughts begin to wander, stop the prayer and wait or read for five minutes before resuming. Another well-tried help for sustaining concentration is to use notes in prayer, a method all should try at some time if only to train oneself to be thorough. In times when thoughts are distracted it is especially valuable. Write down your agenda for prayer, rejecting any idea that this remedy is trivial. List all the situations and people for whom you should pray, including detail, then refer to the list through the time of prayer. Let the list provide the structure, and prayer will be clothed with serious purpose. It is good to note down different details for each topic day by day, so that consecutive prayer sessions are never exactly the same. This helps to maintain concentration and a serious sense of purpose.

The next piece of advice might seem to be in breach of the 'vain repetition' rule, but this is not really the case. If the mind is tired and slow to summon a pleading spirit and to wing a thought heavenward, it can be helpful to pray for everything twice. A restatement of each thought to help one

to focus often kindles earnestness. It is not perhaps a good habit always to pray in this way, but it will frequently make prayer more meaningful. It does not transgress the Saviour's stricture against vain repetition because the purpose is to establish sincerity and full mental assent to the petition, not to –encourage empty and futile incantations or mutterings.

Praying With Scripture

Another precious and well-tried word of advice which greatly assists tired minds is to pray *with* the Scripture. For your devotional time select a passage of Scripture (*Ephesians* would be an example of one that really lends itself to this), and read a verse or a line, and then pray it. Thank God for this truth, whatever it may be. Praise Him for it. Worship Him for that promise, or duty or exhortation, and for what it means. Submit to it and pledge obedience. Repent if convicted by any word. Then read the next verse or line and pause again to reflect and pray. In doing this we let the Word of God –determine what we pray for, and shut ourselves in with the Lord's own words. This will obviously not complete all our responsibilities in prayer, but it may prove immensely helpful in times of special need for bringing the heart to life.

Dealing With Unwanted Thoughts

What remedy is there for anger, inner bitterness, jealousy, or any other unwanted thoughts or feelings which may invade the time of prayer? These must always be very decisively and firmly rejected and expelled from the mind. Mortify, that is put to death, the evil or -inappropriate thoughts. It may be that these thoughts invade the prayer time because they have been allowed to roam freely in our minds for some time. In other words we have not resolved them by prayer and submission to God's providence, but have inflamed them with self-pity, or with resentment toward whoever has wronged us. If so, there are attitudes to be repented of before going to prayer. But if the unwanted thoughts or feelings are justifiable grief or disappointment, we should still set a limit on the amount of time we allow to these thoughts, firmly placing a barrier on them for the time of prayer. Some of the remedies already mentioned for coldness or poor attention-span will help to hold the mind on to the prayer-agenda, alongside the making of a solemn pledge to give no room to the unwanted thoughts.

The Problem of Foreordination

Fatalism will inevitably empty prayer of fervour. It is hard to pray for the sick if we add to every plea *'if it be Thy will'* in a resigned tone. To use these words is right, but to understand them in a fatalistic way is wrong. We must remind ourselves that God employs prayer as part of His process of blessing, making it instrumental. He commands us to pray with fervency for a purpose, and not –because He intends to ignore us altogether.

If the writer may be permitted another personal recollection – this was a hindrance for me in spiritual youth, when first grasping the doctrines of sovereign grace. The usual way of describing how God is the author of all effective prayer is to say that He ordains not only the *ends* (the answer) but also the *means* (the prayer itself), and in a sense this is true. I was taught that every inclination to pray is from God (which is correct), but it was explained in a very mechanistic way, undermining personal responsibility. If I did not pray, it could well have been God's fault, not mine, for not having impelled me to pray in a sufficiently irresistible way.

However, the teaching just described runs the risk of forgetting the mysterious interface between God's foreordination and the –believer's obedience. God's foreordination of my prayers as a

converted person is not quite the same as His foreordination of my salvation. In the latter case He brings it about by irresistible grace. It may have seemed to me that I chose Him gladly, willingly and freely, but the reality is that He changed my heart, making me willing to listen, bending my stubborn will, bringing light into my darkened mind, and placing my conscience under conviction of sin. The –moment I became a believer, however, a new margin of responsibility came into my relationship with God, and into my responses to His promptings.

In the Scripture, God calls me to prayer, and I must respond. He promises blessing if I do so. Certainly, He stirs my heart and gives the desire – but I may still fail to pray. Is it God’s fault? Has He left out some vital ‘link’ in His prompting of me? No, it is my fault, and in not praying I shall forfeit blessing.

We may, according to God’s Word, truly prevail upon Him. He evidently took account of our prayers before the foundation of the world. He is pleased to hear us pray, and undertakes to respond. It is ever true – ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’

Let us never slip into fatalism by a misunderstanding of God’s foreordination. Fervour will be kindled when we have a solid hope that God will take account of our cries, and is persuadable by His people, according to His own secret and mysterious will. We must take at face value the words of Christ, and also those given to John:–

‘Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you’ (*Matthew 7.7*).

‘And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us’ (*1 John 5.14*).

Why Do We Need to Ask in Prayer?

Problems in prayer are often eased when we reflect on the purposes that lie behind asking prayer. (The purposes in this summary have mostly been referred to in the course of this book.)

1 We are called to ask in prayer because prayer establishes God’s sovereignty, might and majesty. The simple fact that we have to ask God for all our blessings, and then give thanks for them, –reinforces in our minds that God is our governor and provider, and that we need His guidance, permission and provision in everything. If we did not have to pray, this vital awareness would surely drop out of our minds, and so prayer keeps us under God’s authority.

2 Prayer also makes us deeply aware of God’s goodness. Whenever we repent, we taste His forgiving love, and when we cry out for –deliverance or light in some trial, He intervenes and helps us, leaving us in wonder at His kindness. If such blessings were given without our engaging in prayer, we would not truly appreciate His goodness and power.

3 Prayer also brings believers into fellowship or interaction with God. Would we fellowship much in conversation with the Lord if we did not need to ask for our blessings?

4 Prayer teaches us about our privileged position as believers. What greater privilege can there be than to have access to a mighty God Who is willing to be prevailed upon by His people! We may have no power of audience with the great ones of this world, and even if we had, there is little likelihood that we could influence them. Yet we may go to the King of kings and Lord of lords, and be efficaciously heard.

5 Prayer, like nothing else, and in the kindest way, teaches us our limitations and inadequacy. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve wanted independence, believing that God was withholding from

them powers and insight which would enable them to succeed without Him. Through prayer God trains us to go in the opposite direction, and to see our need of Him in everything.

6 Prayer also helps to deliver us from pride. If churches filled up without prayer, preachers would think of themselves very highly and take all the credit. If we could live holy lives, or accomplish anything of substance without prayer, conceit would drown us. Prayer maintains our perspective and keeps us humble.

7 Prayer also delivers from self-interest and selfishness, because it helps us to realise we cannot have and do whatever we like. Earthly aims and selfish things 'stick in the gullet' of a praying –believer. The need to ask the Lord about every major thing we do or buy serves as a restraint upon our appetites. Without prayer we might easily make carnal decisions, but we dare not ask God's blessing upon excessive and self-vaunting things. Prayer therefore serves as a caution, and helps us to be better people. We know we must pray for others, and as we do so we become much more concerned about them than about ourselves. Therefore, by prayer, we are to a large extent delivered from the idol 'self'.

8 Prayer always builds up faith, as one's memory bank of God's answers grows. At times the Lord delays His response until we pray repeatedly and more earnestly, all this being a trust-strengthening process. The powerful evidence of answers in the past develops in us a tenacious trust that He will bless in His perfect way, in due time.

9 Alongside faith prayer produces assurance. Many times when feelings fail, the evidence of God's fatherly goodness is derived from answered prayer. Nothing is so melting as great answers to prayer.

10 Prayer, to a remarkable extent, makes the believer aware that he is never alone. We can pray whatever our circumstances, and wherever we are.

11 Prayer also is a great leveller, teaching us that not one of God's servants is greater in His sight than any other. Paul pleads for prayer as though his usefulness depended upon it – and it did. The people had a share in his ministry by prayer, remembering that as a needy mortal, he was like them. Knowing how much he depended on the prayers of others, Paul also was delivered from –exalted views of himself.

12 Prayer inevitably promotes repentance, because the very act of approaching the Lord makes true believers ashamed of their sin, and moves them to seek cleansing.