

LIBERATING PRAYER

NEILT.
ANDERSON



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Chapter One



HEARING FROM GOD

*True silence is the rest of the mind, it is to the spirit
what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.*

WILLIAM PENN

As a new believer, I was taught that prayer was a vital link in our relationship with God. I was sure this was true, but the discipline of prayer was the most frustrating part of my early Christian experience.

In seminary I read about the great saints who would spend two, three, or four hours a day in prayer—sometimes even all night. I was struggling to spend five minutes! I would labor through my prayer list for two or three minutes, then glance at my watch and try to figure out what I was going to say for the next two minutes. Prayer was supposed to be a dialogue with God, but most of the time it seemed like I was talking to the wall. If prayer is so important, why is it so difficult?

My greatest struggle was trying to stay focused. I had made a list of what I wanted to pray for, but distracting thoughts competed

fiercely for my mind. Planned activities for the day were demanding my attention, and pesky thoughts would remind me of my many weaknesses. I spent a lot of time crucifying the flesh and rebuking Satan, assuming he was trying to distract me from my devotional life.

There was some relief knowing that I was not the only one who struggled with prayer. A.B. Simpson discussed the problem in a little booklet entitled *Power of Stillness*.⁵

A score of years ago, a friend placed in my hand a little book which became one of the turning points of my life. It was entitled, *True Peace*. It was an old medieval message, and it had but one thought, and it was this—that God was waiting in the depths of my being to talk to me if I would only get still enough to hear His voice. I thought this would be a very easy matter, and so I began to get still. But I had no sooner commenced than a perfect pandemonium of voices reached my ears, a thousand clamoring notes from without and within, until I could hear nothing but their noise and din.

Some of them were my own voice; some of them were my own questions, some of them were my own cares, some of them were my very prayers. Others were the suggestions of the tempter and the voices of the world's turmoil. Never before did there seem so many things to be done, to be said, to be thought; and in every direction I was pushed and pulled, and greeted with noisy acclamations and unspeakable unrest. It seemed necessary for me to listen to some of them, and to answer some of them; but God said, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Then came the conflict of thoughts for tomorrow,

and its duties and cares, but God said, “Be still.” And as I listened, and slowly learned to obey, and shut my ears to every sound, I found after a while that when the other voices ceased, or I ceased to hear them, there was a still, small voice in the depths of my being that began to speak with an inexpressible tenderness, power, and comfort.

My Other Struggles

In our Sunday school classes and small groups we would always arrange our chairs in little circles for prayer. If the second person to pray happened to be seated by the first person that prayed, a pattern was established. It seemed like an unwritten rule that each person would have to pray in turn as we went around the circle. If people didn't pray when it was “their turn,” and you were supposed to follow him or her in the “established order,” you would wonder what to do. *Why isn't she praying? Doesn't she know it's her turn? Maybe she's just gathering her thoughts. How long should I wait...or should I pass her by?*

When I was next in line to pray, I wasn't agreeing in prayer with the person praying. I was preoccupied with what I was going to say when it was my turn. Then someone would drone on and on, leaving nothing for the rest of us to pray for. They never got the message that long prayers are for the closet and short prayers are for the public.

As a young pastor, I also struggled with the pastoral prayer during the Sunday morning worship service. I became painfully aware I wasn't really praying to God; I was talking to the people. I was more conscious of the congregation's presence than I was of God's presence. I found myself summarizing the sermon or giving the week's announcements in the prayer. *Dear Lord, bless our*

church picnic next Saturday at 9 a.m. at the city park on the corner of Fifth and Central, and help us to remember that those with last names beginning with A through G are to bring salads... That was no prayer—that was an announcement! Another member of the pastoral staff would drone on and on in King James English. Was that more spiritual? (The teenagers would always time him to see if he would break his 11-minute record!)

Realizing that prayer is an important part of any Christian marriage, my wife and I would spend time discussing what we needed to pray about. You would have overheard us saying to each other, “Let’s pray about this...and we need to pray about that.” After a lengthy discussion of what we thought we should pray about, we started to pray. We would go through the same list all over again, only this time we would address our prayers to God. I began to wonder where God was the first time we went through the list!

I know that God accepts our feeble efforts, but I sometimes wonder what He must be thinking. *There they go around the circle again! Why didn’t that couple include Me in their initial discussion? Don’t they know I’m omnipresent and omniscient?* I don’t want to make fun of prayer, but where is the spiritual reality in our communication with God? What are we modeling when we pray publicly?

An Attitude of Gratitude

My prayer life turned the corner one evening when I was teaching a series of lessons on prayer to a group of college students. I was basing my messages on an old book about prayer. The last chapter was entitled “How to Pray in the Spirit.” I read the first half of the book and thought it was theologically sound, so I advertised the titles of each chapter in the book to be the subjects of my lessons that summer. (Not too creative, but typical of young pastors whose reservoir of wisdom is quite shallow. It takes years to internalize

the whole gospel, so we teach the works of dead saints until the message is our own.) I didn't even read the last chapter of the book until the night before I was going to teach the college students how they were supposed to pray by the Spirit.

After reading that last chapter, I didn't have the foggiest idea how to pray by the Spirit (no reflection on the author of the book)! I was hours away from giving a message I had not incorporated into my own life. The message was not mine and I felt spiritually bankrupt. If you have never been in such a spiritual state, then let me say that those times have the potential of being great moments with God! That night God changed my concept of prayer forever.

I had all but given up trying to prepare a talk on how to pray by the Spirit and given in to plan B...which was to show a movie I had saved for such moments. Then came Jesus! It was approaching midnight when the Lord began to direct my thoughts. My journey through the Bible that evening turned out to be one of the most pivotal experiences of my life. I began to reason, *If I'm going to pray in the Spirit, then I must be filled with the Spirit.* So I turned in my Bible to Ephesians 5:18-20:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; *always giving thanks* for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, even the Father.

Then I turned to the parallel passage in Colossians 3:15-17:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and *be thankful*. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all

wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing *with thankfulness* in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* through Him to God the Father.

As a seminary student, I had already observed that being “filled with the Spirit” and “letting the word of Christ richly dwell” within us had the same results. But I hadn’t previously observed that both were rooted in an attitude of gratitude. I turned a page in my Bible to Colossians 4:2: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*.” Then I recalled Philippians 4:6: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known to God.” This discovery was getting me excited as I turned over to 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18: “Pray without ceasing; *in everything give thanks*; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Prayer and thanksgiving seemed to be inseparable. Like a little child finding another package under the Christmas tree—and another, and another—I started to examine Paul’s own personal practices in his epistles, and this is what I found:

I...do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers (Ephesians 1:15-16).

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer (Philippians 1:3-4).

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you (Colossians 1:3).

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers (1 Thessalonians 1:2).

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men (1 Timothy 2:1).

I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day (2 Timothy 1:3).

I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers (Philemon 1:4).

It was exciting to discover how important our attitude is when it comes to approaching God, but it didn't answer my bigger question, "How do I pray by the Spirit?" With the connection between prayer and thanksgiving established in my mind the Lord reminded me of Psalm 95. Read verses 1-7:

O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD,
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.
Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving,
Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
For the LORD is a great God
And a great King above all gods,
In whose hands are the depths of the earth,
the peaks of the mountains are His also.
The sea is His, for it was He who made it,
And His hands formed the dry land.
Come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.
For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep
of His hand.
Today, if you would hear His voice...

Hearing God's Voice

We should come before His presence with thanksgiving, because He is a great God and He has done great things for us. We all deserved eternal damnation, but God has forgiven us and given us eternal life. That alone should cause us to be grateful. Then my eyes drifted to the seven last words in the above passage: "Today, if you would hear His voice." I remember thinking, *Today I would love to hear Your voice!* Maybe I wasn't hearing His voice because I wasn't coming before His presence with thanksgiving. Then again, maybe I wasn't hearing His voice because I wasn't really listening.

Many people in the Old Testament discovered the hard way that complaining does not bring God's blessings. After the Lord delivered the Israelites from Egypt they began to complain. They wanted to go back to Egypt where they had fish, fruit, and vegetables (Numbers 11:4-5). They wanted meat. Moses cried out to God, "Where am I going to get meat to give to all this people?" (Numbers 11:13). Needless to say, "the anger of the LORD blazed hotly" (Numbers 11:10, ESV).

In Psalm 95:7, the word *hear* is the Hebrew word *shema*, which means to "hear as to obey." Verse 8 then reads, "Do not harden your hearts." Why would that admonishment follow? I turned to Hebrews 4:7, which quotes Psalm 95, and read again, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." The fourth chapter of Hebrews gives instruction concerning the "Sabbath rest" that remains. It is an exhortation to cease trusting in our own works and begin to trust in God's works.

Resting in the finished work of Christ did not typify my prayer life. Praying "in the name of Jesus" was just a phrase I tagged onto the end of my self-originated prayers. I confessed to God that my prayer time was mostly a work of the flesh, and that I didn't always come before Him with an attitude of praise and thanksgiving.

God-Directed Prayer

The Lord had a lot more for me that night. I turned to Romans 8:26-27:

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Humanly speaking, we really don't know how to pray or what to pray for, but the Holy Spirit does—and He will help us in our weakness. “Help” (*sunantilambano*) is a fascinating word in Greek. It has two prefixes in front of a word that is often translated as *take*. In other words, the sense of the word “helps” in Romans 8:26 is that the Holy Spirit comes alongside us, bears us up, and takes us over to the other side (spiritually). The Holy Spirit connects us with God. He intercedes for us on our behalf. The prayer that the Holy Spirit prompts us to pray is the prayer that God the Father will always answer.

Active Listening

How does the Holy Spirit help us in our weakness? I wasn't sure, but I tried something that evening. I prayed, “Okay, Lord—I'm setting aside my list, and I'm going to assume that whatever comes to my mind during this time of prayer is from You or is allowed by You. I'm going to let You lead my time of prayer.” Whatever came to my mind that evening was what I prayed about. If it was a tempting thought, I talked to God about that area of weakness. If the busyness of the day clamored for my attention, I discussed my plans with God. I actively dealt with whatever came to my mind.

I wasn't passively letting thoughts control me. I put up the shield of faith, which stands against Satan's flaming arrows, and I was actively "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). If you don't assume responsibility for your thoughts, you may end up paying attention to a deceiving spirit, as Paul warned us: "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Timothy 4:1, NIV). Paul also wrote, "I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

If my thoughts weren't true or if they were evil (blasphemous, deceiving, accusing, or tempting), I brought them to the Lord and exposed them to the light of His Word. In one sense, it doesn't make any difference whether our thoughts come from an external source, from our memories, or from a deceiving spirit. We are responsible to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. That meant if my thoughts were coming from Satan, God was allowing it. In my experience, this typically identifies an area of weakness or sin that I have not previously been honest with God about. In fact, God may allow us to get buffeted around by Satan until we bring our struggles before Him, the only One who can resolve them.

Being Honest with God

The truth is I was hearing from God, but probably not what I wanted to hear. I started to realize why we were warned not to harden our hearts. If we don't harden our hearts we will discover how personal our God really is. In the past, I would try to shove evil thoughts away...without much success. But when I began to bring them to the light, I was amazed how liberated I became. All the issues I had been trying to ignore during prayer were issues

God wanted me to deal with. He wanted to make me aware of matters that were affecting our relationship. Now when I have tempting or accusing thoughts, I share them honestly with God and don't try to hide my human frailty.

When a thought that's hard to face comes into your mind, you will be tempted to change the subject and go back to your old prayer list. But why do you think God is allowing you to struggle with those thoughts? There may be many personal issues that we feel uncomfortable sharing with God, but that discomfort is part of the deception. After all, God already knows our thoughts (see Hebrews 4:12-13), so why not be honest with Him? If God were to prioritize our prayer list, He would begin with the personal issues that affect our relationship with Him.

Suppose you are a parent who has a rebellious child and there are several issues that are keeping you from having an intimate relationship. This child is always coming to you with a list of requests which are geared to the satisfaction of his or her own desires. As you listen to their petitions, what is on your mind? Satisfying their desires and granting the requests would only spoil the child, and not be good for their maturation. You have enough riches to supply all their needs, but you know better than to satisfy their fleshly desires. As a mature adult, you want to share with the child what is best for them, but they don't want to listen to you. So what do you do? What does God do?

Children of God are equipped with the "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) and have been given the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. Two members of the Trinity are actively participating with us all the time. "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25, ESV). The only impediment to the process of real prayer is ourselves.

After explaining what it means to pray by the Spirit in seminary classes, I directed the students to take a walk around the campus with God for the remainder of the class period. That would give them about 45 minutes, which was far more time than most of them would spend in their daily devotions. I encouraged them to start by thanking God for all He had done for them. I asked them to deal honestly with any issues that came to their minds. If nothing came to mind, I told them to reflect upon God's goodness and thank Him for what He had done for them.

Many students returned with great stories. Some said they had accomplished more in that 45 minutes than they ever had before in prayer. Some dealt with personal issues that they had never discussed with God previously. One student said he knew for the first time that God was calling him to minister in China. Almost all found it to be a refreshing encounter with their loving heavenly Father.

Silence Can Be Awkward

For myself, as I began to practice this, I found new freedom just sitting in the presence of God. I didn't feel like I had to say anything or keep a one-sided conversation going. It was actually refreshing, and I could simply sit in silence for an hour or more. I also discovered that my prayer time didn't end when I got up to do something else. I was learning to pray without ceasing and to practice the presence of God. Since I rode my bicycle to church, I started to pray for the people who lived in the houses along the way. The omnipresent God was always with me, and I was becoming more aware of it.

Have you ever been alone with a stranger? Silence can be awkward. You feel obligated to say something. So you mention the weather or the latest news and sports, but nothing personal. On

the other hand, I can sit in the same room with my wife for hours and not feel obligated to talk. Or we can ride together in a car for hours and not say a thing. We are comfortable in the presence of each other. How well you handle solitude is one way to determine your spiritual condition. Can you be still and know that He is God?

If I make a point of talking with my wife, I don't set apart a time, talk to her for 15 minutes, and then walk away thinking we had an excellent time communicating with each other without hearing a word she said. Communication hasn't taken place when there is only one person talking. Communication happens when both parties listen. I have come to believe that prayer is more about listening than talking. If sitting silently before the Lord is awkward, then you may want to consider how intimate your relationship is with God.

God Desires an Intimate Relationship with Us

Fellowship with God is not an abstract theological concept—it is a living relationship. *Koinonia* (fellowship) implies spiritual union. John wrote, “If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). Walking in the light does not mean moral perfection, because the next verse reads, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves” (verse 8). Rather, walking in the light is living in conscious moral agreement with God.

Mature Christians live a confessional life. *Confession to God* literally means to *agree with God*. We don't confess our sins in order to be forgiven. We are forgiven because Christ died for our sins on the cross, and therefore we confess our sins in order to have an intimate relationship with God. In fact, what makes it possible to

be this open with Him about our present moral condition is the fact that we already *are* His forgiven children. In the matter of confession, our eternal destiny is not at stake, but our daily victory is. We don't have to pretend with God, having a false hope that He will accept us in our hypocrisy. As His children, we are already accepted, so we are free to be honest with Him.

Why is it so difficult to be honest with God? He demonstrated His love for us when He sent Jesus to die in our place (Romans 5:8). His love and forgiveness are unconditional. However, God is our Father, and like any good parent, He doesn't appreciate grumbling, complaining children, especially since He sacrificed His only begotten Son for every one of them. He will not be interested in our prayer lists if we aren't trusting and obeying Him. He is not going to help us develop our own kingdoms when we are called to establish His kingdom! I've heard a wise person say that "Prayer is not conquering God's reluctance, but laying hold of God's willingness." It is not trying to communicate our will to God, but discerning His will for our lives. Those who seek to build His kingdom and who come into His presence with thanksgiving will find grace and mercy in time of need:

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in the time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience (Hebrews 10:22).

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. List reasons why you find prayer difficult in your personal life, with your spouse, in small groups, or during ministry.
2. Why does an attitude of gratitude open our hearts to hear God's voice?
3. What kind of prayers will God the Father always answer? Why is this encouraging?
4. Why should you take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ during times of prayer?
5. What is the potential danger of passively believing your thoughts? (See 1 Timothy 4:1 and 2 Corinthians 11:3.)
6. How can the parent-child analogy shape our prayer?
7. What happens to our prayer life when we fail to be honest with God?
8. How well do you handle solitude and what does this say about your relationships?
9. Why can we be totally honest with our heavenly Father without feeling condemned by Him?
10. How does prayer connect with God's will and sometimes collide with ours?