

# Prayer and Communion With God

*by John Starke*

Most Christians know they should be reading the Bible and praying. There's no need to bludgeon our consciences with that exhortation. If you are a Christian and you are not convinced that Bible reading and prayer are important parts of our spiritual diet, consider what would happen to our bodies if, wandering through the wilderness, we never had any bread, nor water. Our stomachs would shrivel and then the rest of our body would follow suite. That's what the Bible says happens to our souls without the Bible and prayer — our food and drink.

But let's, for now, assume that you agree that, yes, Christians should regularly pray and read Scripture. There are certain things that hinder us from practicing these things regularly. One common reason given is the short amounts of time we have in the day. But I think there's a reason behind that reason: boredom. Quite frankly, if Bible reading and prayer was thrilling, it would be much easier to make time. In fact, we'd make every effort! But boredom sets in and we get easily distracted. You begin praying or reading, but the next thing you know you've been thinking about your day or some irritation at work for the past 10 minutes and any warmth or edification that may have been there has been long gone and it's time you stopped and jumped in the shower anyway.

The common practice for most Christians is to read a passage in the Bible (maybe you were edified and encouraged by what you read) and then close your Bible, pull out your prayer list and then pray. Maybe there are times when you were helped, reminded, or perhaps refreshed, but rarely, if ever, do you experience what the psalmist experiences when he tastes and sees that the Lord is good or that the Word of God is so sweet to him that its sweeter than honey and more precious than gold. That's just not your experience and, quite frankly, you wonder if the psalmist is not being a bit of an eccentric.

But the problem is not with the psalmist or Paul, who prays with the expectation of being filled with all the fulness of God (Eph 3:19)! The problem is with our practice. There's a link between our reading and our prayers that's missing and that link is what the Bible calls "meditation" (see Psalm 1). Meditation is not merely reading slowly, but it's sinking your mind, emotions, fears, and affections deep into the text. Meditation is the discipline that lights the fuse between the understanding of the mind and the tasting of the heart; the knowledge of God and the joy of his presence.

Richard Baxter (17th century pastor in England) said that meditation is to read the Bible in such a way as to make your heart hot. I've heard it put this way: meditation turns your quiet time into a burning bush.

So, how does it work? What's the method?

## Some Warnings

Well, before we jump into method, a few warnings:

First, prayer is like a muscle; the more you exercise, the stronger it is. If you have never had a consistent prayer life, you must realize that you are jumping into something that takes practice. To change the metaphor a bit, you are forming new taste buds. If you've never had coffee before, it can be bitter and abrasive the first time. But after drinking it for a while, there's a depth to the coffee that you didn't realize was there before. Prayer is the same. You need to exercise and drink regularly for it to become easier and even sweet.

Second, I'm cautious of calling this a "method" of prayer, as if our communion with God can be distilled into a simple method. It cannot. But often times, Christians need to follow what has worked for Christians in the past in order to know and understand what works for them personally. God is personal, not robotic. You are a person, not a robot. Each of our hearts are different. We all have different fears and different longings. Certain parts of the psalms resonate with certain types of people in certain stages of life. Don't be surprised if you find that your prayer life and communion with God slightly changes as you enter different life stages and face different challenges. But as you grow in understanding what your prayer life looks like, follow the lead of other Christians; see what they do and then try it on for yourself, like you would a coat. Soon you will know what fits and what maybe needs to be tailored.

Third, don't come to God in order to get an experience, but come to God in order to get God. If your prayer life is simply to get a rush or warmth of some kind, then God is simply being used as a means to an end. If you come to God merely for an experience, you will likely get neither a meaningful experience, nor God himself. But come to God for God's sake and you will likely get both thrown in. C.S. Lewis, in a letter he wrote to a little girl in 1950, says this about feelings:

. . . don't expect (I mean, don't count on and don't demand) . . . you will have all the feelings you would like to have. You may, of course: but also you may not. But don't worry if you don't get them. They aren't what matter. The things that are happening to you are quite real things whether you feel as you would wish or not, just as a meal will do a hungry person good even if he has a cold in the head which will rather spoil the taste. Our Lord will give us right feelings if he wishes — and then we must say Thank you. If he doesn't, then we must say to ourselves (and to Him) that he knows best.

## A Method

### *Preparation (2-3 mins)*

Goal: to collect yourself, preparing your heart and mind to taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

- Pray a short psalm (Ps 16:8; 27:4; 27:9-10; 40:16; 43:4; 63:1-3; 67:1; 84:5-7; 103:1-2; 139:7-10) that tells you of the presence of God and his availability of fellowship or his desire for it. Remember his worth, remind yourself of his presence, give up small ambitions and worries, remind yourself that he longs to connect.
- Pray for attentiveness and illumination.

### *Spiritual Reading (12-40 mins)*

Goal: Read and ask the text questions, but to do it in his presence.

- Read your daily passages (OT, NT, Psalm), taking note of anything that's sweet, thanking God for it, and tasting it as it goes by.
- Take a portion of your reading (a paragraph, a few sentences, or even a phrase), put an emphasis on each word, and ask these basic questions, giving brief answers:
  - What does it say about God?
  - What does it say about me?
  - Does the passage give me (i) examples to follow, (ii) commands to obey, (iii) promises to claim, (iv) sins to repent of, or (v) idols to tear down?

### *Meditating (15 - 45 mins)*

Goal: To take phrases, verses, and ideas we've reflected on in our "Spiritual Reading" and now reflect on them more deeply. This is the place where you move from asking the text questions to allowing the text to ask questions of you; from understanding the text to letting the text transform you into more like Christ. Meditation engages your heart and gives a foretaste of heaven, reshaping your desires

- Teaching: What is the basic truth or teaching this conveys?
- Adoration: How can I adore God for this? (What attribute does it show?)
- Confession: What wrong thoughts, feelings, behaviors happen when this is forgotten?
- Thanks: How is Jesus the ultimate revelation of this attribute and/or the ultimate answer to this sin? How is this sin being an inordinate hope for someone or something to give me the satisfaction that only Jesus can really give me?
- Supplication: What do I need from God if I am to realize this truth in my life?

### *Prayer (10 - 15 mins)*

Goal: To pray your meditation. Consider Augustine's famous quote, "O God, our hearts are made for thee, and they shall be restless until they rest in thee." Praying your meditation is finding, if just for a moment, that rest. Meditation is intentionally engaging your heart, but praying your meditation turns you back to God. It actively puts yourself at the disposal of the Spirit, preparing

the way for God's desires to supersede your own and for God to create in you a greater capacity for himself.

- **Pray Adoration:** Tell him what you love and adore about him. Visualize how your life, your friends, your church, your community would be like if he was adored for this more fully. Yearn for it.
- **Pray Confession:** Confess back to him; admit what you've done or who you are. Visualize: what would your life be like; decisions, ambitions, etc., if this truth was explosively true in your life? Yearn for it. Imagine God responding to your repentance with words of assurance from Scripture.
- **Pray Thanks:** Thank Christ; remember his life, some story or passage where this character/attribute is displayed that you are thanking him for. Thank him for who he is and what he has done. Thank him for how he is the ultimate revelation for the answer of your sin.
- **Pray Supplication:** Ask him for what you need to be or do with this truth. Pray for what you need for this truth to be more explosively true in your life.

### *Listen*

In all previous parts of prayer, we are the dominant actor. We are the one looking, searching, learning, savoring, repenting, adoring. But we should end by listening, gazing adoringly in what we've seen of him, hoping to be acted upon, that God might give a heightened sense of his presence, assuring us our adoption and his love toward us.

End your prayer by resting and thinking quietly on one or two truths that you learned. Thank him for it.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Do you sometimes feel like your times in prayer and Bible reading are boring or dry or even discouraging? What factors contribute to these feelings?
2. It is popular in many spiritual circles to talk about "meditation." But this view of meditation differs from the view put forward in this article. How does the biblical view of meditation differ from the view espoused in the larger culture?
3. Practice this method on Colossians 3:1-17. How did it go? What did you find most difficult? What did you find most natural?