

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 34

The Secret Life: Prayer Part 2: Practical

by Maurice Barratt

In the last issue we looked at the principles of prayer. Now we want to consider the practical issues. Wonderful principles are worthless without practical applications.

Let us look at prayer in terms of simple questions: Where should we pray? When should we pray? How long should we pray? Why should we pray? How should we pray - kneeling, standing, sitting?

Where?

Where should we pray? People often say, "We can pray anywhere. It doesn't have to be in church or in our own room, it can be on the street, in the car, anywhere we want." That may be true. The Pharisees prayed out in the street. But Jesus tells us, "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matthew 6:6). This is very specific advice. Your "closet" is your private room where you can be alone. Privacy, Jesus says, is essential for this secret prayer. It is part of the secret life which you practice alone before God. It must be done alone, in secret, where you can be personal and intimate with God.

Perhaps you say you have no such room. But I say everyone can do it. Lock yourself in the toilet for twenty minutes if you have nowhere else to go! Some people say, "My car is my closet." But it can't be. You have to concentrate on driving. You can't rest, you're distracted, you can't possibly have regular quality communication with God like that.

What did Jesus do? If anyone could pray anywhere, it was Jesus, the sinless Son of God. He had wonderful communication with his Father. But even Jesus had to seek a private place alone. Mark 1:35 tells us that "in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." He needed privacy to pray; a solitary place, a solitary time. Don't you?

What about the apostles? Consider Peter. It is the sixth hour of the day. That's midday. But Peter is on the housetop, in the full heat of the sun! Why? Because it's the only private place he can find. He's in someone else's house. He has no room of his own. It's the only place he can find to be a "closet". Sometimes it takes sacrifice. It can't have been pleasant or comfortable for Peter. But what he learned in that prayer time brought about the beginnings of the Gentile church. (See Acts 10:9.)

When?

When should you pray? Again, there is a commonly given answer, "We can pray anytime!" But you can't pray in secret anytime. You can't have intimate private communication with God anytime. We have already seen that Jesus chose the quietest time of day, very early in the morning before daybreak. I suggest that this is the best time, first thing in the morning. You say God is first in your life; why then relegate your prayer time to last thing at night before you go to bed? Isn't that putting God last?

If you pray immediately you get up, you can make a discipline of it, and it must become a discipline. We have a free and easy attitude to it, but Jesus says, "When you pray", not "If you pray". He expects it to be a regular habit, not a casual event when we feel like it. No-one ever built a meaningful relationship on a casual, "I'll see you when I see you" basis. It's not possible.

You say you can pray all the time. It's true, you can. You should. But you don't! And it's certainly true that if you can't have a disciplined prayer time for 15 minutes in the morning, there's no way you're ever going to pray "freely" or "without ceasing".

How long?

How much time should you spend in prayer? If you've never learned the discipline, don't go in at the deep end and say you'll spend an hour a day. It's too much. You'll get distracted or bored or under pressure. It's better to start with ten or fifteen minutes a day. It's discipline you're learning, regular habit. That's the important thing at first, not the amount of time.

It is commonly acknowledged that there are three stages to any close relationship. Firstly there is the initial enthusiasm or infatuation. Then comes the second stage where you begin to see all the other person's faults. The infatuation wears off. The third stage is where you realize you love that person despite their faults. It's a love with full knowledge; you love the person for who they really are, not for what you thought they were.

It's like this with God. Firstly there is the infatuation. You are bowled over by God's love and grace. He seems to answer every prayer and to bless you in countless ways. But then that initial enthusiasm wears off. Prayers don't seem to get answered. God doesn't seem to be the way you thought he was. You have to learn new things. There are trials and tests. God seems far away. (God never lets this happen to new Christians. They're babies, and need constant care and attention. But when you're growing up, it's different. You have to start learning.)

Finally you come through to the stage where you have a real understanding of God, based on a solid relationship. You have learned about God, that he is not just a "sugar-daddy" who provides for your every whim, you have passed through trials and tribulations, but you still love him - in fact you love him more, your love is deeper and more real.

Prayer, Jesus said, should not be "vain repetition". "Vain" is the operative word, not "repetition". To repeat prayers, to pray for a person every day, is not wrong. Jesus encourages us to keep on asking,

seeking, knocking. He told the parable of the widow and the judge to encourage us to be persistent in prayer. It's when repetition is "vain" or pointless that it's bad.

Your relationship with God is as good as the time you put into it. That's a simple formula, but it's true. Show me a holy man or woman, and I will guarantee that person has spent much time with God. The time spent is proportional to the relationship. And as the relationship grows, you will want to spend more time. That's why it's good to start small, then once you've developed the discipline, it will be natural to want to spend more time in prayer.

Why?

What's the purpose of private prayer? To develop relationship. It's for fellowship. If there's one word which describes what God wants from us, it's fellowship. Prayer is not just about what we want from God. When God made Eve, it was because he thought it not good that Adam should be alone. But why did God make Adam? Because he thought it not good that he, God, should be alone. He wanted fellowship with man. He walked in the garden with Adam. He asked Moses to build a tabernacle "that I may dwell among them". In the New Jerusalem God will dwell with man on earth.

Fellowship with God is what he wants from us. Witnessing and working and fellowship with other Christians is important. But fellowship with God is the whole purpose. Don't neglect it.

How?

What is the right position for prayer? Kneeling, standing, sitting, lying on your face? The answer is simple - there is no "right position". Your posture will automatically reflect your true inner attitude. If you're desperate, you'll be on your face. If you're full of praise and thanksgiving, you'll be on your feet! If you're meditating and conversing with God, you'll probably be sat in your chair. The only important thing is to always be real and honest. Don't think about what is the "right position". "Religious posture" is just dead ritual. Get your inner attitude right and your outward behaviour will reflect that.

Discipline

You may be wondering why there is all this emphasis on discipline. Isn't that legalism? Aren't we supposed to be free? Yes, we are. But in natural and in spiritual things, freedom always comes through discipline. Discipline is the way to freedom. Discipline yourself to practise a musical instrument, and eventually you will be able to freely express yourself through that instrument. We all practise disciplines every day, and think nothing of them, whether it be brushing our teeth every night or getting to work on time every morning. If we are disciplined enough to get to work on time each day for a worldly boss and for money, can't we be disciplined for God? Discipline is a vital mark of character, and character is very important to God. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, and self-control is simply discipline. Disciples are literally "disciplined people".

You can discipline by setting yourself a program of things to pray for. There's nothing unspiritual about this. Paul gives us lists of things we should pray for: "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks for all men; for kings, and all that are in authority..." (2 Timothy 2:1-2). We should pray for our families, particularly unsaved members. We should pray for the persecuted suffering church; contact Open Doors or Release International and get hold of some names and personal details of people you can pray for. We should pray for our enemies, anyone who has anything against us or has done us any harm in word or deed. We should pray for our church ministers. We should pray for Christian ministries, missionaries who are doing God's work ... So many things! Write them down. Divide up the week; pray every day for one of these things.

"I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also", said Paul (1 Corinthians 14:15). Pray in tongues ("with the spirit"), pray in English ("with the understanding"). Both are necessary. If you pray in tongues you are praying for the things you do not even know about. They could be vital things. You could be praying for someone on the other side of the world who you've never heard of, but who has a desperate need. You could be praying about circumstances in your own life which have not happened yet, but God knows about them and his Spirit can pray through you.

The ultimate relationship is intercession. This is not your prayer at all, it is God's prayer, God's Spirit praying through you. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us ... and he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26,27). When we know the mind and heart of God, we may, like Moses and Abraham, be able to intercede with God ourselves, with our understanding. This is the ultimate goal of prayer, the ultimate fellowship with God. We can take no better model for our own lives than that of the early disciples. "They continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Four essential things; and perhaps prayer is the most essential of them all.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

God Has A Thousand Ways ...

When our last newsletter was issued the time for my 3rd child to be delivered was only a matter of days away. In my last article I shared the problems I had encountered with my pregnancies so far and to be quite honest I was not relishing the prospect of giving birth yet again. From past experience I knew that I couldn't demand special treatment from God by asking him to make it pain and problem free. But I did pray, with heartfelt pleadings, that God would be merciful to me when my time came. God does answer prayer. Not usually in the way we anticipate. But I know that when you pray from the depths of your heart, he really does listen and answer. This is my latest

experience, and one which I will never forget - not because of the trauma, but because it brought me tremendous joy knowing that God can do for us far more than we could dare ask of him.

Third Time Around

My delivery date was 15th December, but on the 5th I lost quite a bit of blood and was kept in hospital for observation as they didn't understand why this had occurred. I awoke in hospital around 5 a.m. next day and felt my back aching. I knew from other times that this backache was to be expected during 'slow labour' and could go on for days and even weeks, but as the day progressed it got worse and worse. I was put on the machines repeatedly to see what was happening, but the midwives just gave wry smiles and said I wasn't in labour yet. At 2.15 p.m. Maurice came to visit me and in between my gasps and deep breathing tried to share his latest sermon with me. It was all too much and as I sank to my knees leaning on the bed in an effort to get into a more comfortable position, I suddenly felt a bang inside my stomach. I thought something must have happened to the baby to have made it kick so hard. Alarmed I asked Maurice to press the emergency buzzer. The midwives came immediately and I tried to explain what I had felt when suddenly, at 2.30 p.m., my waters broke. Although I have already had 2 children, this has never happened to me before. With the other babies I had to be induced and have my waters broken for me.

Action Stations

In a great flurry of activity the midwives managed to get me into a wheelchair and took me past the staring faces of visitors in the lobby and lift whilst I did my best to keep my composure and look 'relaxed'. I was anything but as I kept gasping and working on my deep breathing! I arrived in the delivery suite at about 2.50 p.m. and was quickly fitted with contraptions which monitored the baby's heartbeat and my contractions. The midwife was just about to leave the room to get something when she noticed a drop in the baby's heartbeat and thought she had better take a look at me. With amazement she told me that the baby's head was already there and when the next contraction came I was to try a push. As my contractions were coming 7 times in every 10 minutes, I immediately gave an almighty push and the head appeared. The midwife hadn't expected this so quickly so told me to pant and stop pushing as she hadn't even had time to put her gloves on. I gave another almighty push and the baby was born. I couldn't believe it. It had been so quick, and such a wonderful experience that I just whooped for joy saying, "Yes!" and "Thank you God!" Little Tamar Keren Barratt came into the world at 3.08 p.m. on Sunday, the 6th December, and weighed just 6 lbs 14 ozs. She was perfect in every way. Yes, God does answer prayer, but never in the way we expect.

A Thousand Ways

I wonder if you remember that chorus: "God has a thousand ways to answer every prayer / And when I stand in need I know that He is there / No good will He withhold from children of His care / A thousand ways has Jesus to answer every prayer." If this is true then why do we so often try to tell God how to answer our prayers? We have all done it ... "Dear Lord, you know I'm really struggling

financially at the moment. Please lay it upon someone's heart to send me some money so that I can pay the rent and the electricity bill. Prove to everyone who knows I'm a Christian what a wonderful provider you are, Lord." Sounds great, but maybe God would really prefer that person to get a job and become responsible rather than sponging on Him and other people all the time. We have often prayed for finance in Barratt Ministries as God alone knows our needs, but nearly every time we have prayed this prayer one of us will realise that we have personal money which could be given to answer our immediate needs. When we have prayed that God would send people to help us with our heavy work load, he has instead pointed us to equipment which could handle our particular problem and would then stretch one of us yet again to take on another task.

The Wrong Prayer

When I became a mother for the first time I had no idea what this entailed and we continued to take ministry bookings. We allowed a 3 month period to get over the birth and planned a months tour in America followed by a 5 weeks tour of Holland after a months break, followed yet again by a tour of Scotland when the baby would be 8 months old. I hadn't anticipated the caesarean birth, the colic, the sleepless nights, the tight clothes or the jet lag, and it all hit me very hard indeed. During the tour of Holland I was so exhausted that I made Maurice go to one meeting on his own, something which I had never ever done before, and was certain that I was heading for a nervous breakdown. I felt convinced that God wanted me to stay at home and let Maurice continue on his own for at least a year and prayed that God would show Maurice what I was certain he had shown me.

The Unexpected Answer

In between the tour of Holland and the tour of Scotland we had a holiday and because we were visiting a church where nobody knew our circumstances I asked God to speak through the sermon to Maurice as he was extremely reluctant to cancel the Scottish tour. But all through the sermon God was speaking to me saying, "the circumstances are not important, but the call is!" With tears in my eyes, because I knew perfectly well what I was doing, I went to the front for prayer and inwardly told God that if this was the cross he had called me to bear then I would take it up and follow him. I didn't feel good about my decision, I just knew that I was obeying God's will for my life. I told Maurice that I would go with him and it was only then that God intervened and showed me that I had been praying the wrong prayers for help.

Abundant Blessing

Upon our arrival back from holiday I received a telephone call from Holland asking me to sing at a special conference which was being held in the Congress Building in a couple of weeks time. Plane tickets for myself and my child would be waiting for me at the airport, and somebody would collect in Amsterdam. Accommodation had also been taken care of. When I looked at my calendar I found that this was the only weekend which I had free, so I accepted the booking knowing that God had arranged it. At the end of the weekend I was given a ministry gift which, again with tears in my eyes,

I refused and told the minister that he didn't know it but his invitation had put me back in the ministry. He knew I wasn't just making a gesture and to my surprise told me to take the money and not to put it in the ministry but to use it for my own personal needs. That had never happened to me ever before!

More Provision

Shortly after this Maurice's younger daughter came to live with us and observing my predicament volunteered to come to Scotland with us to look after Nathan and put him to bed whilst we toured the churches unhindered, which was a tremendous relief to me. She also volunteered to help Maurice with the office work which was a tremendous blessing to her dad. Then to top it all during our Scottish tour I met a woman (who has since become a very good friend) who owns a very classy dress shop and she mentioned that there was a sale on and invited me to go. I did, and with the money that I had been given in Holland I bought a Jacques Vert outfit - jacket, top and skirt all at cost price, then this lady blessed me further by giving me, free of charge, 2 other tops to match the skirt, another skirt and a pair of trousers to match the jacket, shoes, bag and earrings to compliment the outfit. I came away with a wardrobe of clothes, which 7 years later still look classy and constantly remind me of God's generous provision when I agreed to pick up my cross.

The Right Prayer

I have many similar experiences to share of the way God has answered my prayers in one of his thousand ways, and I have come to realise that when I pray for a need, that is all I pray for - that God will answer my need in his way, because I have no notion of what is in his mind. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, the things that God has prepared for them that love him." I wonder how Moses would have prayed to God when he and the children of Israel were trapped by mountains and the Red Sea. Surely even Moses couldn't have come up with such an outrageous suggestion for God to part the waters and keep the Egyptians at bay with a pillar of fire until the Israelites had crossed. Then remove the fire, wait until the Egyptians had all followed on the sea bed, then roll back the waters to drown the whole army!

Remembering Our Place

The bible is full of stories showing how bizarre and spectacular God can be when faced with impossible situations. I've never yet come up with a suggestion and felt God praise me for having given him a good idea. He usually waits until we are rock bottom before he does this kind of thing though, just to let us know that he will not share his glory with flesh. I'm glad God works like this, it keeps us in our place making us remember that we only stand at any moment because of his wonderful grace and mercy.