

Prayer

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[[Sources & changes from 1993 F&P: Mostly new. Some quotations from pp. 22-23. Some queries borrowed from Britain YM.]]

Prayer is spending intentional time with God. Frequent regular times of corporate and personal prayer build our relationship with Him. This enables deeper communion for us as individuals through each day and for the meeting fellowship when hearts gather for corporate worship.

There are many effective practices for personal prayer. Friends use such modes as:

- Reading and deep reflection, also called *Lectio Divina*,
- *Experiment with Light* first explained by George Fox, then more recently outlined by Rex Ambler,
- Harmonious contemplative response to the wonders of the natural world
- Four part prayer—offering praise and thanksgiving, confession, petition, and seeking guidance, and
- Recounting one day’s events along with the feelings, inklings and openings contained within them, known as *Examen*.

Prayer includes more than petitioning God for what we need or want. Prayer can take such forms as thanksgiving, praise, self-reflection and asking Divine support for others, which many contemporary Friends call “holding in the Light.” If we ask for a specific outcome, such as healing or rescue from difficulties, the Divine Power may need to disappoint our expectations. An alternative is to take the issue or the person(s) in our minds and hearts to the Light and leave them there. There we trust that what God wills in this situation is the best thing and can be brought about.

Mindful prayer requires attention. Friends have found ways to focus their attention on the holy by devoting particular times of the day to prayer or through making reminders for themselves within a day. Perhaps prayer happens most naturally for one person on arising in the morning, while another finds the conversation with God richest at the end of the day. Many Quaker families pause for a quiet time of reminder and remembrance before each meal together. Others reflect and connect with God whenever they encounter particular situations, such as passing through a doorway, encountering a traffic signal, or waiting for a computer to start.

Quotations

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:6

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.

Meister Eckhart

Prayer releases energy as certainly as the closing of an electric circuit does. It heightens all human capacities. It refreshes and quickens life. It unlocks reservoirs of power. It opens invisible doors into new storehouses of spiritual force for the person to live by and, as I believe, for others to live by as well. It is effective and operative as surely as are the forces of steam and gravitation.

Rufus M. Jones, 1918

One of these deep constructive energies of life is prayer. It is a way of life that is as old as the human race is, and it is as difficult to “explain” as is our joy over love and beauty. It came into power in man’s early life and it has persisted through all the stages of it because it has proved to be essential to spiritual health and growth and life-advance. Like all other great springs of life, it has sometimes been turned to cheap ends and brought down to low levels, but on the whole it has been a pretty steady uplifting power in the long story of human progress. The only way we could completely understand it would be to understand the eternal nature of God and man. Then we should no doubt comprehend why he and we seek one another and why we are unsatisfied until we mutually find one another.

Rufus M. Jones, 1931

Prayer is friendship with God. Friendship is not formal, but it is not formless: it has its cultivation, its behavior, its obligations, even its disciplines; and the casual mind kills it.

...

Bluntly, what do we most need? We need Someone to thank for life’s glory and danger. We need forgiveness—the assurance that the folly of our sins is forgotten, their wretchedness canceled, and their cruelty turned to man’s ultimate gain. We need zest, “another April to the soul.” We need freedom from the pursuit of fears and the prison of hate. We need reinforcement—not merely our human resource, which at best can only point the prow and set the sails, but the sea wind and the sea tide to speed our stranded ventures. We need, in short, nothing less than friendship with God.

George Buttrick, 1942

As taught and practiced by Jesus, prayer is communion with God, in which mind and heart become open to his sustaining power and gladly and humbly submissive to his directing will.

The Lord’s Prayer is an example of the simple directness of the prayers of Jesus. One can meet God without an elaborate chain of words, even in the rush and tension of everyday life.

Prayer may be response to the beauty or grandeur of nature; to the courage and goodness sometimes revealed by the human spirit; to a desperate sense of need. Prayer may be inspired by joy and sorrow, illness and health, birth and death. Prayer may be without words or in the simplest phrases. Through prayer, daily or special, he who prays can find serenity, humility, strength, courage and direction amid the stresses as well as the joys of life.

Prayer is an exercise of the mind and spirit. Its efficacy is increased by conscious practice. Prayer can work miracles by making individuals sensitive to the will of God and, through obedience, strong to accept or surmount the natural conditions of life.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1972

But to establish the practice of the presence of God so that it becomes as natural as breathing—that requires a rigorous apprenticeship. When I think about it now it sounds silly, but I resorted to some trivial and seemingly ridiculous ways of keeping myself reminded. For instance, I fastened a large safety pin to the front of my dress and I carried a button in my pocket that I felt every time I reached in to find a pencil or a handkerchief. These objects were preferable to Moslem prayer beads which, although they serve the same purpose, called for questioning, whereas no one suspected a safety pin or a button.

Josephine Duveneck, 1978

How do we practice Simple Prayer? What do we do? Where do we begin?

Very simply, we begin right where we are: in our families, on our jobs, with our neighbors and friends. Now, I wish this didn't sound so trivial, because, on the practical level of knowing God, it is the most profound truth we will ever hear. To believe that God can reach us and bless us in the ordinary junctures of daily life is the stuff of prayer. But we want to throw this away, so hard is it for us to believe that God would enter our space. "God can't bless me here," we moan. "When I graduate...." "When I'm the chairman of the board...." "When I'm the president of the company...." "When I'm the senior pastor...then God can bless me." But you see, the only place God can bless us is right where we are, because that is the only place we are!

Richard Foster, 1992

Advices

Confession is an essential opportunity in the tradition of Christian prayer, but holds a dilemma for Friends. It is as easy to fall into a pattern of dwelling on wrongdoing as it is to paper over our faults. Keeping low is a discipline that represents the middle way between these. Keeping low includes admitting our mistakes not only to God, but to others and to ourselves. We do not aspire to some false hope of a perfection achieved by our own efforts. Neither do we worry over dents in the armor of our self images or mistakes which can't be undone.

In prayer, Friends find the humility and courage to face our shortcomings and the guidance and strength to overcome them.

The technique of one's prayer matters far less than its actuality. Our friendship with God is developed by regular time together. Frequent and regular prayer can lead us to become more faithful in our lives. As did Robert Barclay, you will "find the evil weakening in you and the good raised up."

Prayer is waiting to happen, waiting only for us to begin.

Queries

Do you set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? How do you come to know an inward stillness amid the activities of daily life?

Do you encourage in yourself and in others a habit of dependence on God's guidance for each day?

Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come? Do you find

inspiration in the natural world, the sciences or arts, in work and friendships, in sorrow or in joy?

How does our fellowship give corporate attention to prayer, giving voice to joys and needs that Friends feel?