

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(2) DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER**

Psalm 3

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PROLOGUE

Helen B. Poole writes, “ My 4-year-old daughter and I would always pray before she went to sleep. One night she volunteered to pray. She prayed and prayed and prayed—her voice getting softer and softer and softer, until only her lips were moving. Then she said "Amen." "Honey," I said, "I didn't hear a word you said." She answered, "Mama, I wasn't talking to you." Indeed, prayer is conversation with God.

SCRIPTURE

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; {2} many are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God." {3} But you, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. {4} I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill. {5} I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the LORD sustains me. {6} I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. {7} Rise up, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. {8} Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people! (Psalm 3 NRSV).

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The Bible tells us to “live as free people” (1 Pet 2:16 NRSV). In order to do this we need to live in the same way as the only person in history who ever lived a completely free life, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. And when I say live like Jesus I am not referring to his outward circumstances as though we all have to go around in tunics and sandals and speak Aramaic. Rather, we are to be like him in his humanity, his character and his harmonious relationship with God the Father.

I want you to understand that God put you on this planet to be like Jesus. This has always been God’s plan. The Bible says:

"From the very beginning God decided that those who came to Him - and He knew who would - should become like His Son..." (Rom 8:29 LB).

The process of learning to become like Jesus can be called discipleship or spiritual formation. For some, the word “discipleship” emphasizes the need for a personal

commitment to be a follower of Christ whereas the term “spiritual formation” emphasizes the necessity of relying upon the power of God to form the character of Christ within us. In truth, we need both a commitment to Christ and a willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

This process requires that we pay attention to what God is doing in our lives. Attention requires discipline. Spiritual disciplines help free us from distraction, fear and selfishness so we are free to embrace all of life as an act of faith. They are our allies in the campaign to become like Christ and live as free people.

Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. Other disciplines are implied or expressed, but these three are foundational and we are considering them first. Later in the series we will look at some of the other disciplines.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

(2) DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER:

Today we are going to look at the discipline of prayer. There are many kinds of prayers and many facets to prayer, but, at its core, prayer is a conversation between the human soul and God.

The discipline of prayer includes the practice of prayer but it especially involves learning how to pray. For over three thousand years the people of God have learned to pray by praying. The discipline of prayer is nothing less than a lifelong commitment to learn to pray by praying. In this arena we are all beginners.

1. LEARNING THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1 NRSV).

We learn to pray by praying the Disciples' Prayer (see Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4) .

Jesus taught his disciples how to talk to God using a model we usually call the Lord's Prayer but would more accurately be called the Disciples' Prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” (Matt 6:9). But whatever name we use, it is the best known prayer in Christianity, and possibly the best known prayer of any kind in the world. It has brought inspiration, courage and hope to hundreds of millions of people.

We can say the prayer from memory or we can use it as a guide for putting our own words into prayer. But remember, just saying words is not the same as praying. Two billion people can say the Lord's Prayer. Very few ever learn to pray it.

The words of the prayer remind us that our purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy a grateful reliance upon God to meet our needs. The prayer brings all of life to God: our physical, spiritual and moral needs. But the prayer also brings all of God to our lives. It helps us realize that it is through the Father's providence that we receive our daily bread, through the Son's sacrificial death that we are forgiven and through the Spirit's power that we are delivered from the evil one. The Disciples' Prayer teaches us the purpose of prayer.

2. LEARNING THE PATTERN OF PRAYER

We can also learn to pray by praying the ACTS way.

Many English speaking Christians use a simple acrostic to remember the basic parts of prayer. The four words of the acrostic are: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. The first letter of each of these words forms yet another word: ACTS. If you can remember the one word, ACTS, then you can remember the basic components of prayer.

Adoration means to adore God. It is to worship God for who God is. It is to express love to God and cherish the time you spend together.

Confession means to make confession of sin. It is a time to seek and receive forgiveness.

Thanksgiving means to give thanks to God for the many blessings we have received.

Supplication is a little harder to explain. Technically, it is a prayer asking God to meet our own personal needs. As such, it reminds us of another kind of prayer called intercession where we ask God to meet the needs of others. In recent years, I have heard people replace the word "supplication" with the word "stuff" as in we ask God for stuff – stuff we need and stuff other people need. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Stuff.

In addition to "stuff" (or supplication) I think the "S" can also stand for Silence. If the two ears to one mouth ratio means anything then we need to spend twice as much time listening to God as we do talking to God.

3. LEARNING ABOUT ANSWERS TO PRAYER

Before we continue with how we learn to pray we need to understand something about answers to prayer. God answers prayer but the answer may not be what we wanted. Bill Hybels gives helpful advice on how to cope with what may seem like unanswered prayer using the four words: No, Slow, Grow or Go. God gives the right answer to each request and that answer may be described as No, Slow, Grow or Go.

If the request is wrong, God will say, "No." When the disciples made inappropriate

requests of Jesus, he said, "No." The same thing can happen to us.

If the timing is wrong, God will say, "Slow." We are so impatient. We think we know better than God. We need to learn to wait on God and trust in God's timing.

If *we* are not ready, God will say, "Grow." Perhaps we need to mature more in our faith. Maybe there is something we need to change or give up.

But if we are ready to make the right request, at the right time, God will say, "Let's Go!"

4. LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF PRAYER

We learn to pray by praying the Disciples' Prayer. We can learn to pray by praying the ACTS way. Finally, we learn to pray by praying the Psalms.

Prayer is answering speech.¹ We need the Word to hear what God has to say to us and we need the Word to know how to answer. God speaks first. Our prayers are our replies.

The Book of Psalms is the one part of Scripture that is the most helpful for learning prayer. The consensus on this from throughout the history of God's people is quite impressive. The Psalms are necessary "if we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength."²

The Psalms teach us the language of prayer, although this is not immediately obvious. The Psalms were the prayer book of Israel. They were prayed by people who believed that God was at the center. The language of the Psalms is that of response and obedience. The Psalms keep us from talking about God and bring us into an intimate conversation with God. Our aim is to place ourselves before "the obedience-shaping, will-transforming, sin-revoking, praise-releasing God."³

The Psalms are the gateway to prayer. The first two are actually pre-prayers. They prepare us for prayer.

Psalm 1 is the Main Gate.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path

¹ Peterson, Working the Angles, 32.

²Peterson, Answering God, 3.

³Peterson, 14.

that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night (Psalm 1:1-2 NRSV).

The first problem we face in prayer is distraction. On what do we focus? Psalm 1 gives us the answer. Our main focus needs to be on the *torah* (law) of God. *Torah* comes from a word that means to throw something, like a javelin. God hurls his Word toward us and pierces the heart. He made us and seeks to redeem us. He speaks and we are to respond.

Torah is also the name we give to the first five books of the Bible. In a sense, all that God ever needed to say to us can be found in these books. The other sixty-one represent the fulfillment of God's *torah*. The culmination of this is seen in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Psalm 2 is the Strong Gate.

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision (Psalm 2:1-4 NRSV).

The second problem we face in prayer is intimidation. The world seems too powerful. We are overcome by fear. Why bother to pray? Psalm 2 shows us the world as it really is. God sits in heaven with his Messiah Son and together they laugh at the foolish efforts of humanity. Nothing and no one can thwart God.

Psalm 2 keeps us from taking the world too seriously. It also helps us not to take ourselves too seriously. The confidence of prayer is the confidence of God's sovereignty.

Psalm 3 is the Real Gate.

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to me, "There is no help for you in God" (Psalm 3:1-2 NRSV).

This is the first actual prayer in the Psalms. It is not a nice prayer. It is not a flowery prayer. It is the prayer of David when his world was falling apart. His life is out of control. He has many enemies. Friends have turned against him. His own son hates him.

Psalm 3 is a personal and desperate cry for help. Isaac Singer once remarked, "I only pray when I am in trouble. But because I am constantly in trouble, I am always praying." Real

prayer requires an awareness of the human condition.

Almost three fourths of all the Psalms are cries for help. This should teach us something about the nature of prayer. Our first real prayer is a cry for help. We may learn prayers, recite prayers, say prayers; even write prayers. But until our souls have cried out in anguish to God for help we will not have entered the real gate of prayer.

Psalm 3 is probably not the type of prayer that you or I would use to teach someone to pray. Yet its placement in the Psalms is not by accident. We must remember that one of the primary benefits of biblical prayer is that it shatters illusions about the life of faith and keeps us from so much foolishness. We need an accurate picture of God, ourselves and the world. Psalm 3 helps us to learn how to do that.

The psalm not only reports what is going on it also offers relief. But the relief seems disturbing, violent. Slapping cheeks and breaking teeth offend our sensibilities. The psalm makes no apology for this. We are in a real mess. Our sin-conditioned humanity is in trouble. We pray in language that gives full disclosure to our human spirit. Nothing less than an honest heart will do.

True relief comes in sharp contrast to our request. We can “lie down and sleep” knowing that the world belongs to God and he watches over it. The biblical day starts in the evening. So when we awake the day is half over.⁴ God has been *at* work long before we go to work.

The Psalms are the gateway to prayer. They have been the prayer book of God’s people for over three millennia. The Psalms teach us to pray with others who have prayed. They are, as John Calvin said, the “anatomy of all parts of the soul.”⁵

The ancient and common practice is to pray through the Psalms on a regular basis. Pray them aloud and without haste. Some like to use a journal to record their thoughts. In any case, pay attention to yourself as a praying person answering God.

The Psalms do not displace our other prayers. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, intercession and silence are still necessary. The Psalms help us to pray. They help us to respond in a meaningful and honest way to what God has said to us. Spiritual growth requires attention and nothing helps our prayer attention better than the Psalms.

⁴The Hebrews considered the evening as the beginning of a new day. See Genesis 1.

⁵John Calvin, Commentaries: the Book of Psalms, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), xxxvii.

CONCLUSION

Over the centuries, Christians have used a three-fold pattern for a life of prayer:

- The first part is Worship. One day in seven the community of faith gathers for worship and prayer.
- The second part is Recollected Prayer. These are the spontaneous prayers that can be part of any day or time: prayers of adoration or praise, prayers of confession, prayers of thanks, prayers for the needs of ourselves and others.
- The third and most neglected part, is the Psalms. This involves reading the Psalms in a prayerful manner on a daily or near-daily basis. If you read one Psalm a day, four days a week, you could easily complete the Book of Psalms in less than a year. Psalm 119 may take more than one day, as it is a long Psalm. Once you have completed Psalm 150 start over with Psalm 1.

We learn to pray by praying. Pray the Disciples' Prayer. Pray the ACTS way. Pray the Psalms. Through prayer we can explore and enjoy a vast country of freedom known as salvation.