

## The Vast Menu of Prayer

Imagine if you ate plain oatmeal for breakfast every single day. I'm talking *plain* oatmeal: no brown sugar, no walnuts, no fruit, no milk, no raisins – nothing but oatmeal. Now imagine if you also had plain oatmeal for lunch every single day. It gets worse. You also have plain oatmeal for supper every single day. Imagine what your life would be like if there was only one bland thing on the menu. You might lose some weight, but any sense of anticipation or enjoyment would be gone.

When it comes to prayer sometimes we have the idea that there's only one thing on the menu: sitting completely still with our eyes shut. Not surprisingly, quite often there is very little sense of anticipation or enjoyment in prayer. When there's only one thing on the menu, that's quite common.

But what if you could look forward to a rich variety of experiences in prayer? What if there were a vast menu from which to choose when it came to prayer? What if you looked forward to times of prayer much like you look forward to bacon and eggs and waffles and a reuben sandwich and chicken alfredo and jambalaya and butter pecan ice cream? (These are a few of my favorite things.) When you read through the Bible, you find great variety when it comes to posture, place, types of prayers, etc. There really is a vast menu when it comes to prayer.

We have asked several people from Faith tell us about their habits of prayer. Chris Barker was kind enough to videotape and put together their responses. Please watch the screen.

*Video* (posted on web site: [www.faithmanhattan.org](http://www.faithmanhattan.org))

Chances are that you are drawn to one or more of those habits of prayer. With those examples in mind, I want us to think about the amazing variety of ways that we can come into the presence of God in prayer.

***Variety in Posture.*** Consider the various postures of prayer reflected in Scripture. Postures *can* be deceiving: you can kneel down and look humble yet still be proud in heart. But that doesn't have to be the case. Postures *can be* a genuine expression of what is happening in our hearts.

***Kneeling.*** Many different Scriptures speak of “bowing the knee” to God. Daniel, for example, kneeled down in prayer to pray when he heard that King Darius had signed a decree forbidding worship of any god but him (the king). This is what we read in Daniel 6:10.

10 Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.

Perhaps Daniel knelt down with the windows open to declare that he worshipped YHWH alone. More importantly, there are times when kneeling down is the best way to express

with our bodies what is going on in our hearts. Sometimes we kneel as an expression of worship. None other than Napoleon Bonaparte said, "If Socrates would enter the room we should rise and do him honor. But if Jesus Christ came into the room we should fall down on our knees and worship Him" (cited in *A Life of Prayer*, Cedar, p. 59). Sometimes we might kneel as an expression of submission when we're praying about some aspect of God's will for our lives.

*Hands Raised.* Numerous Scriptures speak of raising hands during prayer. Psalm 28:2 reads:

2 Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,  
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.

It's almost like a little child reaching up to a parent for help. Perhaps you've never raised your hands to God – either publicly or privately. But you might find yourself in a situation in which lifting your hands up to God would complement your words. Or perhaps you might lift your hands without words as a way to express submission to God. (See also Psalm 63:2-4, 141:1-2, 1 Timothy 2:8 "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.")

*Sitting.* We have the example of David sitting before the Lord praying. We read this in 2 Samuel 7:18.

18 Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, "Who am I,  
O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?"

David sat down when he had a conversation with God about the kingdom God had promised.

*Face-down.* Sometimes our circumstances are so distressing that it's appropriate to fall face-down before God in prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane this is how Jesus prayed (Matthew 26:39):

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father,  
if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

This posture reflected Jesus' absolute abandonment to the will of God. There will be times when we need to assume the same posture before God.

This isn't an exhaustive list of all the postures for prayer found in Scripture; it's just a sampling. (For example, we also find example of people praying with their eyes open (John 17:1), with their faces turned toward heaven, etc.) But what this sampling suggests is that perhaps we should be more intentional about the way we utilize our bodies in prayer. When it comes to posture in prayer, there is a vast menu from which to choose.

In his book "Long Wandering Prayer" David Hanson addresses the fact that so often we try to deny our bodies instead of utilize our bodies in prayer. Listen to what he writes:

Many Christians, including pastors, report difficulty praying for more than ten minutes. Can we do anything for more than ten minutes? Of course. Most of us, whether we will admit it or not, can shop for eight hours. Yes, the same person who cannot pray for more than ten minutes can shop for eight hours. I can shop for clothes for about thirty minutes. But I can spend three hours in a computer store. I can browse four hours in a theological bookstore before my first blink.

We consume for eight hours, and we pray for ten minutes. Or is it that we have construed prayer as something so preposterously body depriving, so mind-numbingly inactive that it is impossible to imagine praying for eight hours and still have a heartbeat? I think that's it.

*(Long Wandering Prayer, pp. 49-50)*

I think that's it too. We often make prayer a completely mental activity without involving our bodies at all. Hanson argues rather convincingly that we were never meant to deny our bodies in prayer; rather, our bodies were meant to be an asset in prayer. Sitting, standing, kneeling, raising our hands, lifting our eyes to heaven, lying face-down before God, etc. are all ways to involve our bodies in expressing ourselves to God. It's been said that 50 to 60% of communication is body language. That's something to consider even in our communication with God.

I mention all of this to suggest that we need to find ways of praying that involve our bodies. There is a vast menu when it comes to posture in prayer.

**Variety in Place.** In the video we saw that people pray in a variety of places: homes, neighborhoods, chapels, on the job. This variety is reflected in the Scriptures as well. There's a sense in which the whole world is a sanctuary.

For starters, we do find people praying in designated places such as the temple. Even after the death and resurrection of Christ, the disciples maintained their Jewish traditions of praying at the temple. For example, in Acts 3:1 we read:

1 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.

The temple in the old covenant has a very different function than a church building in the new covenant. The temple was the place where God localized His presence for the people; it was the designated place for worship (sacrifices, prayer, offerings, etc.). In the new covenant, the people themselves are the temple; God's presence is localized in us individually as well as corporately. Even though no building is holy in the way that the temple was, spaces/places set apart for prayer can be very significant in our prayer life (as we saw in Neil's life in the video). One of the things we want to do here at Faith in coming years is design spaces that are set apart for prayer. We're very aware that this building is very busy on Sunday mornings. Of course this room (the worship center) is available during the week for prayer; there is rarely anything going on during weekdays.

Scripture records how people commonly went out into creation to pray (this is Brian's habit as we saw in the video). We read in Matthew 14:

23 And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

When Abram was praying about his childlessness, God “took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be” (Gen. 15:5). In Psalm 8 David’s prayer flowed out of his awe over looking into the heavens:

3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;  
4 What is man, that You take thought of him?  
And the son of man, that You care for him?

Creation can be a great stimulus to our praying. It illustrates God’s greatness, creativity, provision, glory, and power. I mentioned David Hanson earlier in relation to not denying our bodies in prayer. He also points out that there is a huge difference between being outside and actually “considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air” and simply forming a mental picture of the flowers and birds. Jesus actually suggested that we consider God’s creation first-hand to learn significant lessons. [Note: When Paul went to the city of Philippi, he went outside the city to the river where they “expected to find a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13). Apparently an out-of-doors place of prayer was common.]

My encouragement, again, is to incorporate a variety of different places and spaces in your prayer life. Simply changing where you pray might increase your anticipation and enjoyment in prayer; it might stimulate you to pray longer or to pray about different things than you’re used to praying. There is a vast menu when it comes to places for prayer.

***Other types of Variety in Prayer.*** I want to mention briefly other types of variety in prayer.

*Praying alone . . . praying with others.* Jesus definitely encouraged praying alone. In Matthew 6 we read “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” Jesus was warning against the hypocrisy of some who wanted to look righteous by letting others see them praying. Jesus was stressing that God, not other people, should be our audience. Therefore, we should pray in secret, in the presence of God alone.

In addition, there is great emphasis on praying with other believers. The book of Acts record that one of the church’s foundational commitments was corporate prayer (Acts 2:42):

42 And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

We too devote ourselves to prayer when we meet in homes in small groups, when ministry teams meet, Wednesday morning prayer groups, etc. As well, we have a team of people here at Faith evaluating and thinking about ways that the larger church family can gather for prayer. We trust that God will lead us to forms and times that will allow us to devote ourselves to prayer as an entire congregation.

*Prayer and fasting.* Fasting involves going without food for a period of time in order to heighten your spiritual senses for prayer and seeking God. Before a person becomes proficient in fasting, going without food can be more of an annoyance and distraction than anything else. But those who have learned how to be content without food for a period of time have found fasting to be a great asset in prayer. Fasting is not practiced as punishment or as a badge of honor; fasting is simply a way to abstain from something good (food) in order to focus one's spiritual senses on God in prayer. Obviously a lot more can and should be said about fasting; please keep in mind that fasting is on the menu.

*Spontaneous prayer and "written prayers."* We are encouraged to bring our requests to God simply and boldly using whatever words we have. Yet sometimes we pray using the psalms or the Lord's prayer or one of Paul's prayers. Sometimes they express things we wouldn't think to express or they express our hearts more effectively than we can. As well, many have found other "books of prayers" to be helpful in entering into God's presence. Lowell mentioned this in his message on February 15<sup>th</sup>.

*Types of prayers.* We have mentioned several different types of prayer in this series: praise and thanksgiving (last week's message by Lowell), petition (making requests of God), lament (bringing our complaints to God), confession of sin (admitting when we've sinned). There are many other types or categories of prayer. Richard Foster's book on prayer explores 21 different categories of prayer – everything from the prayer of tears to contemplative prayer to authoritative prayer. The point of these distinctions isn't merely to categorize our prayers. Not everyone finds these categories helpful. But some of you might find that these categories give you new ideas of what to pray and how to pray. There is a vast menu when it comes to types of praying. We would do well to have a balanced diet, a mixture of praise, petition, lament, confession, thanksgiving, etc.

***Closing Challenge:*** In light of the fact that there is a vast menu when it comes to prayer, my strong encouragement to you is to develop habits of prayer that fit your schedule, your body, your mind, and your walk with God. Granted, sometimes prayer is hard work, but you don't get any extra points for being miserable during prayer. I'd encourage you to move forward in faith in your prayer life, finding times, places, and modes of prayer that help you enter into God's presence. We have to assume that the commands, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and "devote yourself to prayer" (Colossians 4:2) are possible to obey. Let's trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into deeper experiences in prayer.