

How To Spend A Day In Prayer

by Lorne Sanny

"I never thought a day could make such a difference."

"My relationship to everyone seems improved."

"Why don't I do it more often?"

Comments like these come from those who set aside a personal day of prayer. With so many activities—important ones—clamoring for our time, real prayer is considered more a luxury than a necessity. How much more so spending a *day* in prayer! The Bible gives us three time-guides for personal prayer. There is the command to "pray without ceasing"-the spirit of prayer-keeping so in tune with God that we can lift our hearts in request or praise anytime through the day. There is also the practice of a quiet time or morning watch-seen in the life of David (Psalm 5:3), of Daniel (Daniel 6:10), and of the Lord Jesus (Mark 1:35). This daily time specified for meditation in the word of God and prayer is indispensable to the growing, healthy Christian. Then there are examples in the Scripture of extended time given to prayer alone. Jesus spent whole nights praying. Nehemiah prayed "some days" upon hearing of the plight of Jerusalem. Three times Moses spent forty days and forty nights alone with God.

Learning from God

I believe it was in these special times of prayer that God made known his ways and his plans to Moses. He allowed Moses to look through a chink in the fence and gain special insights, while the rank-and-file Israelites saw only the *acts* of God as they unfolded day by day.

I once remarked to Dawson Trotman, founder of The Navigators, "You impress me as one who feels he is a man of destiny, one destined to be used of God."

"I don't think that's the case," he replied, "but I know this: God *has* given me some promises that I know he will fulfill." During earlier years Dawson spent countless protracted times alone with God, and out of these times the Navigator work grew-not by methods or principles, but by promises given to him from God's word.

In my own life one of the most refreshing and stabilizing factors, as well as the means for new direction or confirmation of the will of God, has been those extended times of prayer-in a park in Seattle, on a hill behind the Navigator home in Southern California, or in the Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs.

These special prayer times can become anchor points in your life, times when you "drive a stake" as a landmark and go on from there. Your daily quiet time is more effective as you pray into day-by-day reality some of the things the Lord speaks to your heart in protracted times of prayer. The quiet time in turn is the foundation for "praying without ceasing," going through the day in communion with God.

Perhaps you haven't spent a protracted time in prayer because you haven't recognized the need for it. Or maybe you aren't sure what you would do with a whole day on your hands just to pray.

Why a Day of Prayer?

Why take this time from a busy life? What is it for?

1. *For extended fellowship with God*- beyond your morning devotions. It means just plain being with and thinking about God. God has called us into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9). Like many personal relationships, this fellowship is nurtured by spending time together. God takes special note of times when his people reverence him and think upon his name (see Malachi 3:16).

2 *For a renewed perspective.* Like flying over the battlefield in a reconnaissance plane, a day of prayer gives opportunity to think of the world from God's point of view. Especially when going through times of difficulty we need this perspective to sharpen our vision of the unseen, and to let the immediate, tangible things drop into proper place. Our spiritual defenses are strengthened while "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For . . . what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

3. *For catching up on intercession.* There are nonChristian friends and relatives to bring before the Lord, missionaries on various fields, our pastors, our neighbors and Christian associates, our government leaders-to name a few. Influencing people and changing events through prayer is well-known among Christians but too little practiced. And as times become more serious around us, we need to reconsider the value of personal prayer, both to accomplish and to deter.

4. *For prayerful consideration of our own lives before the Lord*- personal inventory and evaluation. You will especially want to spend a day in prayer when facing important decisions, as well as on a periodic basis. On such a day you can evaluate where you are in relation to your goals, and get direction from the Lord through his word. Promises are there for you and me, just as they have been for Hudson Taylor or George Mueller or Dawson Trotman. And it is in our times alone with God that he gives inner assurance of his promises to us.

5. *For adequate preparation.* The first two chapters of Nehemiah describe the launching of Nehemiah's plans for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 2:12 he speaks of "what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." When had God put this plan in his heart? I believe it was during the time mentioned in the opening verses of this book, in which Nehemiah spent "some *days*" in prayer before the God of heaven. He fasted and prayed and waited on God, and when the day for action came, he was ready.

I heard a boy ask a pilot if it took quick thinking to land his plane when something went wrong. The pilot answered that no, he knew at all times where he would put down *if* something went wrong. He had that thought out ahead of time.

So it should be in our Christian life. If God has given us plans and purposes in those times alone with him, we will be ready when opportunity comes to move right into it. We won't have to say, "I'm not prepared."

The reason many Christians are dead to opportunities is not because they are not mentally alert, but they are simply unprepared in heart. Preparation is made when we get alone with God.

Pray on the Basis of God's Word

Daniel said, "In the first year of his reign [the reign of Darius], I, Daniel, understood

from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed." (Daniel 9:24)

Daniel understood from the Scriptures what was to happen. As a result, he prayed.

It has been said that God purposes, therefore he promises. And we can add, "Therefore I pray the promises, so that God's purposes might come to reality." God purposed to do something, and he promised it, therefore Daniel prayed. This was Daniel's part in completing the circuit, like an electrical circuit, so the power could flow through.

Your day alone with the Lord isn't a matter of sifting out on a rock like the statue of *The Thinker* and taking whatever comes to mind. That's not safe. It should be a day exposed to God's word, and then his word will lead you into prayer.

You will end the day worse than you started if all you do is engage in introspection, thinking of yourself and your own problems. It isn't your estimate of yourself that counts anyway. It's God's estimate. And he will reveal his estimate to you by the Holy Spirit through his word, the open Bible.

How to Go About It

Having set aside a day or portion of a day for prayer, pack a lunch and start out. Find a place where you can be alone, away from distractions. This may be a wooded area near home, or your backyard. An outdoor spot is excellent if you can find it; but don't get sidetracked into nature studies. If you find yourself watching the squirrels or the ants, direct your observation by reading Psalm 104 and meditating on the power and beauty of God in creation.

Take along a Bible, notebook and pencil, a hymnbook, and perhaps a devotional book. I like to have with me the booklet *Power through Prayer* by E. M. Bounds and read a chapter or two as a challenge on the strategic value of prayer. Or I sometimes take Horatius Bonar's *Words to Winners of Souls*, or a missionary biography such as *Behind the Ranges* by Mary C. Taylor, which records the prayer victories of J. O. Fraser in inland China.

Even if you have all day, you will want to use it profitably. So lose no time in starting, and start purposefully.

Wait on the Lord

Divide the day into three parts: waiting on the Lord, prayer for others, and prayer for yourself.

As you *wait on the Lord*, don't hurry. You will miss the point if you look for some mystical or ecstatic experience. Just seek the Lord, waiting on *him*. Isaiah 40:31 promises that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. Psalm 27:14 is one of dozens of verses which mention waiting on him. In Psalm 62:5 David says, "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him."

Wait on God first to *realize his presence*. Read through a passage such as Psalm 139, grasping the truth of his presence with you as you read each verse. Ponder the impossibility of being anywhere in the universe where he is not. Often we are like Jacob when he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I was not aware of it" (Genesis 28:16)

Wait on him also for *cleansing*. The last two verses of Psalm 139 lead you into this. Ask God to search your heart as these verses suggest. When we search our own hearts it can

lead to imaginations, morbid introspection, or anything the enemy may want to throw before us. But when the Holy Spirit searches he will bring to your attention that which should be confessed and cleansed.

Psalms 51 and 32, David's songs of confession, will help you. Stand upon the firm ground of 1 John 1:9 and claim God's faithfulness to forgive whatever specific thing you confess.

If you realize you've sinned against a brother, make a note of it so you won't forget to set it right. Otherwise, the rest of the day will be hindered. God won't be speaking to you if there is something between you and someone else that you haven't planned to take care of at the earliest possible moment.

Next, wait on God to *worship him*. Psalms 103, 111, and 145 are wonderful portions to follow as you praise the Lord for the greatness of his power. Or turn to Revelation 4 and 5, and use these passages in your praise to him. There is no better way to pray scripturally than to pray Scripture.

If you brought a hymnbook you can sing to the Lord. Many wonderful hymns put into words what we could scarcely express ourselves. Maybe you don't sing very well—then be sure you're out of earshot of others as you "make a joyful noise to the Lord." *He* will appreciate it.

This will lead you naturally into thanksgiving. Reflect upon the wonderful things God has done for you and thank him for these—for your own salvation and spiritual blessings, for your family, friends, and opportunities. Go beyond that which you thank the Lord for each day.

As you wait on God, ask for the power of concentration. Bring yourself back from daydreaming.

Prayer for Others

Now is the time for the unhurried, more detailed prayer for others that you don't get to ordinarily. Remember people in addition to those for whom you usually pray. Trace your way around the world, praying for people by countries.

Here are three suggestions as to what to pray:

First, make specific requests for them. Perhaps you remember or have jotted down various needs people have mentioned. Use requests from missionary prayer letters. Pray for their spiritual strength, courage, physical stamina, mental alertness, and so on. Imagine yourself in the situations where these people are, and pray accordingly.

Second, look up some of the prayers in Scripture. Pray what Paul prayed for others in the first chapters of Philippians and Colossians, and in the first and third chapters of Ephesians. This will help you advance in your prayer from the stage of "Lord, bless so and so."

Third, ask for others what you are praying for yourself. Desire for them what the Lord has shown *you*.

If you pray a certain verse or promise of Scripture for a person you may want to put the reference by his name on your prayer list, and use this verse as you pray for that person the next time. Then use it for thanksgiving as you see the Lord answer.

Prayer for Yourself

The third part of your day will be prayer for yourself. If you are facing an important decision you may want to put this before prayer for others.

Again, let your prayer be ordered by Scripture and ask the Lord for understanding according to Psalm 119:18—"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." Meditate on Scripture verses you have memorized or promises you have previously claimed from God's word. Reading through an entire book of the Bible, perhaps aloud, is a good idea. Consider how it applies to your life.

In prayer for yourself, 1 Chronicles 4:10 is one good example to follow: Jabez prayed, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." That's prayer for your personal life, for your growth, for God's presence, and for God's protection. Jabez prayed in the will of God, "and God granted his request."

Your attitude during this portion of your day in prayer should be, "Lord, what do *you* think of my life?" Consider your main objectives in the light of what you know to be God's will for you. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). Do you want to do God's will more than anything else?

Then consider your activities—what you *do*—in the context of your objectives. God may speak to you about rearranging your schedule, cutting out certain activities that are good but not the best, or some things that are entanglements or impediments to progress. Strip them off. You may be convicted about how you spend your evenings or Saturdays, when you could use the time to advantage and still get the recreation you need.

As you pray, record your thoughts about your activities and use of time, and plan for better scheduling. Perhaps the need for better preparation for your Sunday school class or a personal visit with an individual will come to your mind. Or the Lord may impress you to do something special for someone. Make a note of it.

During this part of your day, bring up any problems or decisions you are facing and seek the mind of God on them. It helps to list the various factors involved. Pray over these and look into the Scriptures for guidance. You may be led to a promise or diction from the passages with which you have already filled your mind during the day.

After prayer, you may reach some definite conclusions on which you can base firm convictions. Your aim in a day of prayer should be to come away with stakes driven—new conclusions, renewed convictions, and specific direction. But don't be discouraged if this is not the case. It may not be God's time for a conclusive answer to your problem. And you may discover that your real need was not to know the next step but to have a new revelation of God himself.

In looking for promises to claim, there's no need to thumb through looking for new or startling ones. Just begin with the promises you already know. If you have been through the *Topical Memory System*, start by meditating on the verses in the "Rely on God's Resources" section. Chew over some old familiar promises the Lord has given you before, ones you remember as you think back on your Christian life. These familiar promises may lead you to others. The Bible is full of them.

You may want to mark or underline in your Bible the promises God gives you during these protracted times alone, and put the date and a word or two in the margin beside them.

Variety is important. Read a while, pray a while, then walk around. Don't get cramped in one position.

As miscellaneous things pop into your mind, either incorporate these into prayer or write them down if they're reminders of something you should do later. Have you noticed

how many things come to mind while you're sitting in church? This will happen too during your prayer time. So either pray about them or put them down and plan how and when you can take care of them. Don't just push them aside or they will plague you the rest of the day.

At the end of the day, summarize on paper the things God has spoken to you about. This will be profitable to refer to later.

Don't think you must end the day with some extraordinary experience or discovery. Looking for this may give you new insight, but it often takes your attention from the real business. The test of the day is not how exhilarated you are when the day is over, but how it works into your life tomorrow.

Two Questions

The result of your day in prayer should be answers to the two questions Paul asked the Lord on the Damascus road (Acts 22:6-10). Paul's first question was, "Who are you, Lord?" You will be seeking to know him, to find out who he is and what he is like.

Paul's second question was, "What shall I do, Lord?" The Lord answered him specifically. Ask God to confirm his will for you as you unhurriedly but earnestly seek his guidance.

Make Time

Days of prayer don't just happen. Besides the attempts of our enemy Satan to keep us from praying, the world around us has plenty to offer to fill our time. So we have to make time. Plan ahead-the first of every other month, or once a quarter.

God bless you as you do this-and do it soon! You too will probably ask yourself, "Why haven't I done this more often?"

The Three Parts of Your Day

1. *Waiting on the Lord . . .*
to realize his presence.
for cleansing.
To worship him.
2. *Praying for others . . .*
with specific requests.
By using prayers in the Scriptures.
By praying for them what you pray for yourself.
3. *Praying for yourself . . .*
for your personal life.
for your growth.
for God's presence.
for God's protection.

A Checklist For A Day In Prayer

Essential:

- A Bible
- Paper and pencil

Helpful:

- Your current prayer list
- Prayer letters from missionaries and Christian workers
- A hymnbook
- A devotional book
- A sack lunch
- A calendar
- A family or personal budget
- Notes from your last day in prayer