

Chapter 7

Enjoy the Gift of Having God's Ear

He is “the God of all grace” (1 Pet. 5:10). Not only did he choose us before the world began, and give his Son to save us, and cause us to be born again, but he also sustains the whole of our Christian lives, from day one to that Day, in his matchless grace. He covers our lives with his unexpected kindness through people and circumstances, in good times and bad, and showers us with unforeseen favor in sickness and health, in life and in death.

But as we've seen, he doesn't always catch us off guard. Or even usually. God has his regular channels—the means of grace—those well-worn pathways along which he is so often pleased to pass and pour out his goodness on those waiting expectantly. The chief thoroughfares are his word, his church, and prayer. Or his voice, his body, and his ear. Now we turn from our focus on his voice to his ear.

But we must see his listening to us in prayer in relation to our listening to him in his word.

The Speaking God Who Listens

First sounds his voice. By his word, he reveals himself and expresses his heart, and unveils his Son as the culmination of his speaking. By his word, he creates (Gen. 1:3) and re-creates (2 Cor. 4:4), not just individual members, but a body called the church (which is the means of grace we'll turn to in part 3).

And wonder of wonders, not only does he express himself and bid us hear his voice, but he wants to hear ours. The speaking God not only has spoken, but he also listens—he stops, he stoops, he wants to hear from you. He stands ready to hear your voice.

Christian, you have the ear of God. We call it prayer.

A Conversation We Didn't Start

Prayer, simply put, is talking to God. It is irreducibly relational. It's personal—he is the Absolute Person, and we are derivative persons, fashioned in his image. In a sense, prayer is as basic as persons relating to each other, conversing, interacting, but with this significant caveat: in this relationship, we don't chat as peers. He is Creator, and we are creatures. He is the great Lord, and we are his happy servants. Yet because of his amazing love and extravagant grace, he invites us to interact. He has opened his mouth and spoken to us. Now he opens his ear to hear us.

Prayer, for the Christian, is not merely talking to God, but responding to the One who has initiated toward us. He has spoken first. This is not a conversation we start, but a relationship into which we've been drawn. His voice breaks the silence. Then, in prayer, we speak to the God who has spoken. Our asking and pleading and requesting originate not from our emptiness, but his fullness. Prayer doesn't begin with our needs, but with his bounty. Its origin is first in adoration, and only later in asking. Prayer is a reflex to the grace he gives to the sinners

he saves. It is soliciting his provision in view of the power he has shown.

Prayer is the glad response from the bride, in a joyfully submissive relationship with her Groom, responding to his sacrificial and life-giving initiatives. And so it is stunning grace we find in such a simple statement from the psalmist, which applies to every Christian, “The LORD accepts my prayer” (Ps. 6:9).

The Great Purpose of Prayer

It shouldn't surprise us, then, to find that prayer is not finally about getting things from God, but getting God. Born in response to his voice, prayer makes its requests of God, but is not content to only receive from God. Prayer must have him. John Piper writes,

It is not wrong to want God's gifts and ask for them. Most prayers in the Bible are for the gifts of God. But ultimately every gift should be desired because it shows us and brings us more of him. . . . When this world totally fails, the ground for joy remains. God. Therefore, surely every prayer for life and health and home and family and job and ministry in this world is secondary. And the great purpose of prayer is to ask that—in and through all his gifts—God would be our joy.¹

Or, as C. S. Lewis so memorably said, “Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine.”² The great purpose of prayer is to come humbly, expectantly, and—because of Jesus—boldly into the conscious presence of God, to relate to him, talk with him, and ultimately enjoy him as our great Treasure.

¹ *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 142–43.

² *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 8.

Prayer's Practices in Perspective

So, prayer—having God's ear—is ultimately about having more of God. And having God's ear (like hearing his voice) is not first and foremost about our particular practices and postures—the specific habits we develop—but the principle of continually relating to him, privately and with others. He is holy, and so we worship (adoration). He is merciful, and so we repent (confession). He is gracious, and so we express appreciation (thanksgiving). He is loving and caring, and so we petition him for ourselves, our family, our friends, and our world (supplication).³

Because prayer is part and parcel of an ongoing relationship with God, the book of Acts doesn't accent the particular times and places of early-church prayer, but tells us, "All these with one accord were *devoting themselves to prayer*" (Acts 1:14). And Paul charges the church not to specific prescribed habits, but to "be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12), to "continue steadfastly in prayer" (Col. 4:2), to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), to be "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (Eph. 6:18). Prayer is first and foremost an orientation of life, rather than the particular practices and patterns which might be characteristic of a certain community or season of life, or season of church history.

Such a pervasive call to prayer as we see in the New Testament is not the stuff of impersonal achievement and raw discipline, but intimate relationship. It has underneath it not an iron human will, but an extraordinarily attentive divine Father who is eager to "give good things to those who ask him" (Matt. 7:11). Not only is he a Father who reveals his bounty in words, and "knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:8),

³Adoration (A), confession (C), thanksgiving (T), and supplication (S) form the memorable ACTS of prayer, which is a simple mnemonic device for the various kinds of prayer that make our approach to God healthy and whole. We'll say more in the next chapter about the ACTS of prayer.

but he wants you to ask. He wants to hear. He wants to interact. He means to have us not in a hypothetical relationship, but in reality. He is even more ready to hear us than we are to pray.

In Jesus's Name We Pray

All this is possible only through the person and work of God's Son. Not only did Jesus die for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), to show God's love for us (Rom. 5:8), but he rose from the grave and ascended to heaven as "a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb. 6:20), appearing in the very presence of the Father (Heb. 9:24). Jesus is "at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). Having conquered death, the God-man, stationed in his glorified body, "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Our having God's ear is as sure as our having God's Son.

And so in this light, we turn general intentions into more specific pathways in the coming chapters, and then into even more specific plans in our particular communities and individual lives. We develop habits of life—habits of grace. We find a regular time and place. We pray by ourselves and with others. We pray "in the closet" and throughout the day. Prayer is scheduled and spontaneous. It's in the car, at the table, in between appointments, and beside the bed. We pray through Scripture, in direct response to God's word. We adore, confess, give thanks, and ask. We learn to pray by praying, and by praying with others, and discover that "praying regularly with others can be one of the most enriching adventures of your Christian life."⁴ We will explore all that and more in the pages to come.

We have the ear of God. Let's make the most of this.

⁴Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 93.

Chapter 8

Pray in Secret

Now is the time to take a fresh look at your private prayer life. Perhaps you'll find a tweak or two that you could make in the coming days. Typically the best way to grow and make headway is not a total overhaul, but identifying one or a couple small changes that will pay dividends over time.

Or maybe you have little-to-no real private prayer life (which might be as common today among professing Christians as it's ever been), and you really need to start from scratch. You may feel first-hand the weight of Francis Chan's alarm: "My biggest concern for this generation is your inability to focus, especially in prayer."¹ Perhaps it's true of you, and you're ready for change.

Whether you're in need of a little self-evaluation or learning as a beginner, I'd like to offer a few practical pointers on private prayer. But let's start with why private prayer, or "closet prayer," is so important in the first place.

¹Spoken from the stage at Passion 2015 in Atlanta, January 3, 2015.

Praying “in the Closet”

“Closet prayer” gets its name from Jesus’s famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–8. The context is Jesus’s instructions for not “practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them” (Matt. 6:1).

When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when 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. (Matt. 6:5–6)

Just as praying in earshot of others had its immanent rewards in first-century Judaism, so also it does in our twenty-first-century church communities, whether it’s in church or small group or just at the table with friends and family. It can be easy to slide into impressing others as the driving motivation for our praying with others, whether it’s our length, tone, topic, mood, or word choice, all carefully chosen to produce certain effects in our human hearers alone.

It’s a tough line to walk, because we must pray with others—in church and in our homes and elsewhere—and public prayer *should* take into account that others are listening; it *should* have others in mind. But the danger lurks of sidelining God and shifting our focus to making ourselves look impressive.

But “closet prayer” offers a test of authenticity for our public praying. As Tim Keller comments on Matthew 6:5–6:

The infallible test of spiritual integrity, Jesus says, is your private prayer life. Many people will pray when they are required by cultural or social expectations, or perhaps by

the anxiety caused by troubling circumstances. Those with a genuinely lived relationship with God as Father, however, will inwardly *want* to pray and therefore will pray even though nothing on the outside is pressing them to do so. They pursue it even during times of spiritual dryness, when there is no social or experiential payoff.²

Private prayer is an important test of whether we are real. Is he our true treasure, or are we simply using prayer to appear godly and impress others? Are our prayers really directed toward a God who hears us and wants to do us good, or is prayer a tool for our getting what we want from others? Private prayer cuts through the fog and confusion and helps to show that our relationship with God is authentic.

Remedy for Inadequacy

But private prayer is not just a test of our trueness, but also an ongoing remedy for our inadequacies and the lack of desire we often feel for God. Prayer, says John Piper, is “not only the measure of our hearts, revealing what we really desire, it is also the indispensable remedy for our hearts when we do not desire God the way we ought.”³

Private prayer shows who we really are spiritually *and* is essential in healing the many places we find ourselves broken, needy, lacking, and rebellious.

Context for Relationship

Also, as Keller notes, prayer is essential for “a genuinely lived relationship with God as Father.”⁴ This is the heart of prayer—not getting things from God, but getting God. Prayer is where

²Prayer: *Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 23.

³*When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 153.

⁴Keller, *Prayer*, 23.

we speak back to God, in response to his word to us, and experience what it means to enjoy him as an end in himself, not just a means to our petitions. In prayer, we enjoy the gift of having God's ear (chap. 7) and discover for ourselves that we are not just servants, but friends (John 15:15). We are not just hearers of his word, but his own children who have his heart (Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6–7). He wants to hear from us. Such is the power and privilege of prayer.

Here's where we see why Jesus practiced so well what he preached about prayer and finding a "closet." He had no inadequacies to make up for, and no doubts about his trueness, but he desperately desired fellowship with his Father. And so, again and again, he prayed alone. "After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. . . . He was there alone" (Matt. 14:23; also Mark 6:46). Not just once, but as a regular habit, he "would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). "Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35).

Before selecting his twelve disciples, "he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). Even in Gethsemane, three times he "went away and prayed" (Matt. 26:36, 42, 44; also Mark 14:32–42). From the beginning of his ministry to the eve of his crucifixion, he made the practice of private prayer an essential part of his relationship with the Father.

And so, it is difficult to overstate the place of private prayer. It is, in many ways, the measure of who we are spiritually. How we pray, says J. I. Packer, "is as important a question as we can ever face."⁵

⁵ *My Path of Prayer: Personal Glimpses of the Glory and the Majesty of God Revealed through Experiences of Prayer*, ed. David Hanes (West Sussex, UK: Henry Walter, 1981), 56.

Five Suggestions for Secret Prayer

That private prayer is important, even essential, for the Christian is clear. But how we go about private prayer is gloriously open for our various experiences and routines and patterns, in the differing seasons of our lives. As you evaluate (or begin) your own rhythms and habits, here are five suggestions for enriching private prayer.

1. CREATE YOUR CLOSET

Find your regular place for private prayer, and if you can't locate a ready-made spot, make one. It may simply be a clean desk, or someplace you can kneel. Many of us have found that beside the bed proves more fruitful than lying in bed. Maybe you can find an actual closet, or nook under the stairs, with enough space to sit or kneel, and enough light to read and even capture notes. It will help you be regular in private prayer to have your go-to spot.

2. BEGIN WITH BIBLE

Because prayer is a conversation we didn't start, but a response to God's initiation and speaking to us in his word, many of us have learned, with George Mueller, to start with the Scriptures. Mueller says that for ten years, he began each day with an immediate attempt at fervent and extended prayer, only to eventually learn how much richer and focused his prayers were when they came in response to God's word.

From then on, Mueller began with a brief prayer for God's help as he read, then he went first to the Bible and would open his ear to God in his word by meditating on the Scriptures, then transition, through the discipline of meditation (chap. 3), into his season of daily private prayer.⁶

⁶A *Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Mueller, Written by Himself, Jehovah Magnified. Addresses by George Mueller Complete and Unabridged*, 2 vols. (Muskegon, MI: Dust and Ashes, 2003), 1:272–73. For an excellent new book on this topic, see Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

3. ADORE, CONFESS, THANK, ASK

After reading and meditating on the Bible, and before opening the gates to “free prayer”—voicing whatever is on our hearts—it can help to have some form ready at hand. William Law counseled that morning devotions “have something fixed and something at liberty.”⁷ So also with private prayer.

Martin Luther recommended praying through the form of the Lord’s Prayer with fresh wording each day. One time-tested form is ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. First, *adore* God with praise for the truth revealed in your reading of and meditation on the Scriptures, then *confess* your own sins and failings and foibles, then *give thanks* for his grace and mercy, and finally *supplicate*—petition him, ask him—for requests for yourself, your family, your church, and beyond.

4. DIVULGE YOUR DESIRES—AND DEVELOP THEM

First, something fixed; now, something at liberty. This is “free prayer,” where we pray our hearts, and what burdens and anxieties are on us that day and in that season of life. In private prayer, we are our most honest with God and with ourselves. Express your heart to your Father. He knows it already, and he wants to hear it from you. This is an unspeakable privilege.

But prayer to God is not only the place for divulging our heart, but also developing our desires. There is power here. Prayer changes our hearts like nothing else—perhaps especially when we follow the prayers of the Bible, in the psalms and from the apostle (as in Eph. 1:17–21; 3:16–19; Phil. 1:9–11; Col. 1:9–12), as guides for the shaping and expressing of our desires toward God.

⁷Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 154.

5. KEEP IT FRESH

Change it up for a new year, or a new month, or a new season of life. Regularly, or just on occasion, write out prayers with focus and care (this is a valuable facet of the discipline of journaling, as we'll see in chap. 11), or sharpen your affections in prayer with fasting (chap. 10), or take a break from the chaos of life with some special retreat for silence and solitude (chap. 12).

Few things are as worthy of your attention and investment as the privilege and power of private prayer.



The habits of regular private prayer will change in various seasons of life. There have been seasons in which I've kept bulleted lists to pray through daily, or items to pray through weekly. I've kept detailed notes about what I was praying for on particular days, and tried to circle back to make notes about answered prayers or altered desires. Another helpful practice has been writing out or typing daily prayers (more on this in chap. 11 on journaling).

In recent years, I've found it most helpful to pray just briefly at the outset of my devotional time something like, "Father, please bless the reading of your words to my heart this morning," trying to keep it fresh each day. Then after reading, and hopefully meditating on some section from the reading, I try to transition into prayer based on what I've been meditating, using the rough pattern of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication (the well-known ACTS of prayer).

I typically begin with praise or "adoration," speaking words of worship to God for who he is, what he's done for me, or what he promises to do in light of the text on which I've meditated. I hope to linger here, at least for several sentences, cultivating

a heart of worship as I dig to put into words the glory I've glimpsed in his word.

Next is confession. Still in view of my moments of meditation, I'll confess my sins and inadequacies and failures, both general and specific, depending on the truth in view.

Next, I seek to cultivate gratitude toward God as I express words of thanksgiving for his grace and mercy, that despite his grandeur and my smallness, his holiness and my sinfulness, he has rescued me and made me his own in Jesus.

Finally, I turn to supplication, to specific requests for myself and those I love, first flowing from the truth in view during meditation and then letting it broaden out to what's on my mind and schedule for the day. Presently, my seasons of prayer have been almost exclusively meditation-driven, and guided by what's on my mind and heart that day, rather than list-driven.⁸

Private prayer can be an intensely personal time between you and God. It should be. As you make a regular practice of hearing God's voice, and responding to him in prayer, you will develop your own habits of grace for enjoying God in prayer.

⁸I don't disparage the keeping and praying of lists, but would caution you to avoid the dangers outlined by Timothy Keller, citing J. I. Packer. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 229–30.