

A PRACTICAL PRIMER ON PRAYER

by

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CHAPTER ONE -

PRAYING IN PUBLIC

"Pray for great things,
Expect great things,
Work for great things,
But above all, pray."

- Reuben Archer Torrey

"Many were gathered together, praying" (Acts 12:12),

"IT IS EASY for him to pray but hard for me" is the thought that often comes when someone is heard to pray in public. But surely it wasn't easy for that one the first time. That experience is never easy.

I remember the first time I was asked to join a group for prayer. It was when I was attending the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. A noon-hour prayer meeting was held to encourage the students to pray for missionaries. I greatly admired the girl who was in charge of this group; so when she asked me to join the group, I did - to please her.

I had never prayed before in front of others, and a sharp pain came into the pit of my stomach when I knelt with the girls. The leader handed me a list of missionaries with their requests written after their names. We were to pray in turn. When my turn came, it came. I could not back out.

I peeked at the name and request of the first missionary on my list, closed my eyes, mumbled a prayer, peeked at another name, and so on, until I had named the last request. What a relief that was!

This group met each week. At first, my praying was probably not truly "**in the Spirit**"; but as the semester progressed, I conquered my nerve until I could pray in front of people without being at all conscious of their presence.

Because praying is spiritual, most people think it is like magic, a sort of "presto-chango, there it is"! Others think it is a gift and wish that GOD would give it to them. And still others, because

requests are so common in spoken prayers, think that asking is all there is to prayer.

Spiritual things, however, follow the same laws as the physical; and prayer, being truly spiritual, needs practice to be developed. Even the disciples realized that a man had to be taught to pray. They asked, "**Lord, teach us to pray**" (Luke 11:1). Let us, therefore, begin our thinking on prayer with the understanding that one must learn to pray.

The only opportunity that the average Christian has to pray with others is in the young people's meeting or in the midweek service.

Often a person who has been a Christian for only a short time goes to one of these services, wanting and planning to take part in the prayer time. He may even make a false, dry-throated start or two, in between the easy-sounding prayers of the "regulars"; and then, just as he's gulped again and made ready, the leader closes the prayer period.

The easiest and best way for you to lose this feeling of self-consciousness when praying in a group is to pray aloud and often when alone with the Lord. Then, when you pray in public, the sound of your voice will not frighten you.

It will seem natural and the presence of others will not bother you.

Christians even make a mistake in praying silently when they are alone. JESUS undoubtedly spoke His prayers. Otherwise, would John have been able to record the high-priestly prayer of John 17? And when JESUS was in the garden of Gethsemane, He "**fell on his face and prayed, saying . . .**" (Matthew 26:39).

If Christ prayed aloud when He was in distress, shouldn't we follow His example and pray audibly when we are alone with GOD?

Here is another little hint which will help you. When you are alone, before you begin to pray, read one of the Psalms or any other favorite chapter of Scripture aloud. Then you will find it natural to slip into spoken prayer.

After you have become used to the sound of your own voice, the next battle to be won is over the feeling that others beside GOD are listening to you. This can only be won by concentrating on GOD, by thinking of Him so completely that you forget the others.

There is a story told of a man who was asked to lead in prayer, but who replied, "Please excuse me. I couldn't pray in front of others."

"Sir, you are to speak to your Master and not to them," was the answer. "And my Bible tells me He is not so critical and censorious as men are."

Another thing which bothers some people is the belief that their prayers must be extemporaneous, even though they are told ahead of time that they will be asked to lead in prayer. This is not true. In fact, they might well consider what they are going to say.

If you were asked to address a king in public, you would certainly give thought to what you were going to say. Why not give thought then when you are to speak to the Creator of Heaven and earth, the only true GOD and Potentate?

Prayers are often said to be a blessing themselves to the listeners; and yours will be more of a blessing if instead of groping for words, you endeavor to express your highest thoughts.

Let us consider the different parts of a public prayer. For instance, there is the title by which we shall address GOD. I have taken quiet delight in noticing how various people address the Almighty.

It is not necessary always and only to address GOD as "**Our Father**." Why not think before deciding which title you will use? Many are permissible.

"Our Lord and our GOD." "Gracious and ever loving Father."

Dr. Walter Wilson speaks of Him as "Our lovely Lord." Our lovely Lord! How that title makes one dwell upon thoughts of His loveliness! Two or three times I tried using it, but since it did not come naturally, I stopped.

Once I heard a sailor pray, "Dear GOD, sir."

That was natural to him. He had been trained to say "Sir" to those he respected.

You should use the title which best expresses your feeling toward GOD, and there are many to choose from; however, "Almighty GOD, our Father," is perhaps the most expressive. It has the combined thought that He is the ruler of Heaven and earth and also our Father.

The Lord instructed us to say, "**Our Father**." The Scriptures tell us, too, "**Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father**" (Romans 8:15).

Another excellent way to begin a public prayer is with a Psalm of praise. A good choice, for instance, would be the Eighth Psalm, which begins, "**O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!**" Or how about a few verses from Psalm 103?

Always, before you mention your petitions, say a few words of thanksgiving or praise; but do not start by saying "We come into Thy presence." This is not true.

You have not been out of the presence of GOD since the moment you were saved.

As the Scripture reminds us, "**Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Oh whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there**" (Psalm 139:7, 8).

We are always in the presence of GOD. If we live each moment conscious of His presence, we shall not have to readjust our mental attitude when we begin to pray, but we shall pray to the One we have been silently including in our every thought and conversation.

Probably the best way to begin a prayer is with a grateful mention of CHRIST's death on the cross, "**For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father**" (Ephesians 2:18).

In the body of your prayer, do learn to address the Deity as "Thou." It may sound stilted to you, but it has become a form of respect.

"You" is the commonly used form of the pronoun. "Thou" is really the intimate form, suggesting family relationship. Both were formerly used in English; and although we have dropped "thou" from our everyday speech, several other languages still have two forms for the pronoun "you."

Stay then with the Old English "Thou" and its forms. You will be both reverent and right.

Why not take a small slip of paper and list the requests you wish to make in your prayer? Do not misunderstand me. I don't mean for you to write out your prayers as some do. That may make praying stilted and may result in one's reading a prayer instead of praying.

We who are plain, average Christians with no one but GOD to please need not write our prayers. If we should forget what we want to say, that is all right. We can just stop, and the service is not disrupted. I merely meant for you to make a short list of the things you wanted especially to remember. In time and with training you will not need even that, but rather, only a little forethought.

There will be times when you cannot even make a list, for without warning someone will ask you to lead in prayer. This is your opportunity to praise the Lord for His many benefits. "**Oh, that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!**" (Psalm 107:31). Praise Him for His bountiful goodness, His gracious provision for His own, the privilege of living in a country of free worship, and the privilege of prayer. There are so many things for which to thank the Almighty that a grateful heart could pray on indefinitely.

After these words of praise, ask Him to bless the meeting, the message, those present, those absent and those ill or in special need. Pray for whatever special petitions may have been mentioned, then close.

Be careful to close your prayer in the name of the Lord JESUS. We do not have sufficient merit of our own so GOD will answer our prayers. He has promised to answer only the prayers made in CHRIST's name. "**Whatever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son**" (John 14:13).

The word "**amen**" means "*so be it.*" We use it at the end of our prayers to mean that we accept GOD's answer, whether it be "yes" or "no."

Public prayer at the beginning of a meeting is for a definite purpose and should not be long.

You are only to ask the Lord's blessing on the meeting.

Because a person takes a long time to pray, it does not necessarily follow that he has prayed for more than the person who has prayed a shorter prayer. A long prayer sometimes consists of a greater number of words without greater spirituality. Our Lord answered short prayers. When a woman prayed, "**Lord, help me,**" He granted her request. When Peter walked on the water and became frightened, he cried, "**Lord, save me.**" And the Lord did save him.

Spiritual pride may creep in with the ability to pray for a long time, and we should forego that tendency when praying before non-Christians. Prayer is apt to be boring to the person who is not a Christian, and in public meetings there are usually some present who are not Christians. We must consider them, because Scripture says of Paul, "**I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some**" (I Corinthians 9:22). We should live up to that principle, hoping for the same privilege of winning some to CHRIST.

There is a story told about Moody and long public prayers. It is said that he was at a meeting where the person asked to make the opening prayer prayed on and on. So Moody arose and announced a hymn to be sung while the brother finished his prayer.

We should also consider the one who does not have the spiritual strength to pray long prayers. Our lengthy prayer might so embarrass him that he would hesitate to pray a shorter prayer.

Long prayers have their place in the Christian life; but they are to be prayed in our private devotions or with those of equal spiritual interests. This is true not only in public meetings, but also in prayer groups. If those in the group would pray shorter prayers, more people would be encouraged to take part.

Sometimes you will be in a group where the first person mentions all the requests. When that happens, the others in the group usually feel flat, as if there were no further reason to pray, even though they want to pray. I know of no remedy, since anyone in a prayer group is privileged to include all the requests if he wishes. But when that happens, you can always pray.

"Dear Lord, Thou hast heard the prayer. I add my voice and heart's desire to these requests."

Perhaps the best way to encourage different people to take audible part in a prayer group is for the leader to begin by asking different ones to volunteer to pray about certain requests.

Are you troubled about what you should do when someone else is praying? This used to bother me. I felt that it was impolite to listen when someone was talking to GOD; but if I didn't listen, my mind wandered. I didn't know what to do until one summer when I was a counsellor at a teen-age conference. One of my duties was attendance at a prayer group of the counsellors.

The woman in charge was a highly respected spiritual leader of young people. I knew that she listened when others prayed because she said "amen" aloud whenever she agreed with what was said. I thought that whatever she did must be right.

Since then I listen to what is being prayed; and according to the custom of the group, I say

"amen" either aloud or to myself, if I agree. I find this increases the spirit of united prayer.

There are times when the person who is praying mumbles to such an extent that you can't hear what he is saying. You feel, as the Scripture says, "**If the trumpet give an uncertain sound who shall prepare himself to the battle?**" (I Corinthians 14:8). But prayer time is precious. Don't waste it. Pray silently whatever you think should be prayed at that time.

Sometimes no one prays aloud. Don't let the silence make you nervous. It does bother most people, and it used to affect me that way until I heard Dr. Louis Evans explain that silence has a part in prayer. Perhaps more people are actually praying during a time of silence than when someone is praying aloud. And you can always use the silence to present quietly an extra petition of your own.

Another difference that you will notice in Christian groups is that in some churches the people sit during prayer whereas in others they kneel and in still others everyone stands.

This is because churches follow different customs. The various ways are mentioned in the Bible. Mark 11:25 says "**When ye stand praying.**" Psalm 95:6 says, "**Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker.**" In I Kings we read that Elijah sat when he prayed. There is no set rule.

Scripture also says, "**I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands**" (I Timothy 2:8).

Only a few churches follow that instruction.

The important thing is that the position should not make the praying one conscious of his body. Standing tires those who are not used to it. A sitting position puts the speaking organs in a cramped position. Kneeling is most frequently chosen, because the very position of the body expresses humility before the Almighty.

Most people close their eyes when they pray. They do so to shut out the things of the world. It helps to focus attention upon GOD, but it is not necessary when you are alone. Some day, stand alone on a hilltop beside a leafy tree, with the azure sky above and the wind on your face; the presence of GOD will be so real that it will not be necessary for you to close your eyes. You will be conscious only of Him and of His loveliness.

As long as we are discussing the technicalities of prayer, there is a bad habit about which I should like to warn you. Do not constantly repeat the Lord's name. Some people place it between every sentence as though it were a period. We would not naturally use a person's name that often in conversation. Sometimes, when this is done, the listener subconsciously listens for the repetition of the name and thus loses the spirit of prayer.

The same is true of the sound "uh." The constant repeating of sounds or words is merely a nervous habit that can be broken or even prevented with a little thought and effort. It is a test of our unselfishness to make our public prayers attractive to those who listen.

Several times we have discussed considering others when we pray. Let us admit at this point that

it is possible to consider people too much when we pray. Prayer is always to GOD; yet some people pray at others.

Sometimes even valued servants of GOD, when they complete their messages and begin to pray, address a few sentences to the Almighty and then start to pray their message over again. You can sense when they stop talking to GOD and start praying at the congregation. If you can sense it, so can others, especially the non-Christians, and the spirit of prayer is lost.

Some people even pray to others. They use prayer as a means of giving out information about their work or the needs of the work. Or they may say things in their prayer about the people who are listening, things that they would not otherwise have the courage to say.

Still others yield to the temptation to pray showy prayers, hoping to impress others. We can only ask GOD to forgive them for abusing the precious privilege of prayer. Let us check our own spirit to see that we are not tempted to do the same thing. We should never pray anything in public that we do not mean from the depth of our hearts.

And it is possible to pray in public from the depth of the heart only if prayer is made daily, constantly, and worshipfully. Then you will be so accustomed to praying that you can pray naturally in public and your prayer will be a blessing.

GOD's Temple: A Prayer

O love divine, O matchless grace,
That Thou shouldst give me, Lord, a place
 Within Thy temple fair,
Whose wondrous beauty, jewels bright,
 Make not a perfect building quite
 Without my humble share!

I would not make it my concern
 On fretted arch or lofty dome
 Conspicuous place to hold;
 But though a lowly spot I fill,
With loving heart to work Thy will.
 A perfect stone to mold.

And O, dear Lord, inspire my breast
 With holy zeal to build my best
 On CHRIST, the Cornerstone.
 That in my own appointed place
The light of Heaven may show rare grace
 In what my hands have done!

And when shall come that last great day.
 And all that's false must pass away
 In fire's consuming test,

O may my building, wrought through Thee.
Stand fast, my glorious guerdon* be
To share Thy heavenly rest!

- Emily S. Strong

**Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines "guerdon" as: A reward; requital; recompense; in a good or bad sense.*

~ end of chapter 1 ~
