

>> Extras

This supplementary material may be photocopied for group members or downloaded from the web site: www.chpublishing.co.uk/lifefsource.

>>1. Let's be practical

No relationship works if we do not devote time to enjoying and working at it: so too in our prayer relationship with God. So . . .

- > Establish a *regular time for prayer*. Temperaments, and work and family schedules are so varied that there is no universal 'right time'. For some it will be at the start of the day, for others at the end. Others may find two or three times a week works best. Keep it brief and achievable (15 to 30 minutes at first) rather than daunting and unattainable. Then let it expand as your prayer life develops.
- > *Find a place to pray*. Where you will not be interrupted and where you can have a Bible, a cross, icon, hymn book, etc., to help you.
- > *Find a pattern that works for you*. ACTS is one such pattern – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. The *seeing-knowing-going* framework used in this course is another. Or you might want to use a liturgical framework such as *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* or *Time to pray*, or one of the many other 'orders'.
- > *Keep a balance between form and freedom*. Liturgies, hymns, set prayers are a great aid (especially in difficult times), but we need to use our own words and express our real feelings to God. A diet of all set prayers, or all spontaneous prayers, is likely to prove unbalanced: find room for both on your prayer menu.
- > *Ring the changes*. However comfortable you are with your pattern of prayer, take a break from time to time. Holidays are a great time to try something different. You will come back spiritually refreshed!
- > *Pray through the day*. God is always present, so . . .

Use natural 'pause' times, such as waiting for the kettle to boil, or driving to work, as prompts for prayer.

Turn your emotions into prayers. Don't just feel it, pray it!

Turn the inner dialogue up to God. We all talk to ourselves through the day. Let God in on this conversation.

Bless others: whose lives you touch – the harassed mother in the shop or the difficult boss. Pray a blessing on them.

>>2. Archbishop Rowan Williams' Pause for Thought

Well, Terry, I don't know how well placed I am, but [what] I do know is that many people find difficulty with prayer. It's one thing to talk about it but quite another to do it; and one of the questions I've often been asked is 'Have you any tips on how to pray?' Let me put it this way: I'm not much of a one for sunbathing; too much lying around and I get fidgety and a bit guilty. But there's something about sunbathing that tells us more about what prayer is like than any amount of religious jargon.

When you're lying on the beach or under the lamp, something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light can get at you.

People often have the impression that praying is anxiously putting on your best clothes, finding acceptable things to say in the right sort of language, generally getting your act together – oh! and concentrating, of course. But when in the Bible Jesus advises his friends about how to pray, he tells them not to worry about any of this. Say, 'Father', he tells them. Just be confident that you're welcome as you would be at home. All you need to do is to be where the light can get at you – in this case, the light of God's love.

Give the time and let go of trying hard (actually this is the difficult bit). God is there always. You don't need to fight for his attention or make yourself acceptable. He's glad to see you. And he'll make a difference while you're not watching, just by radiating who and what he is in your direction. All he asks is that you stay there with him for a while, in the light. For the rest, you just trust him to get on with it.

*Broadcast Tuesday 18 October 2005 on the Terry Wogan Show,
BBC Radio 2*

>>3. When prayer seems impossible

There are two possible reasons why we might face a time of darkness in our faith, when we hold out our hand and it does not feel as if it is being held. The first arises from events in our lives. Something happens in our life – the death of a loved one, a serious illness, the loss of our job, the approach of our own death – that brings us face to face with issues about ourselves and about life that we had kept hidden. Sometimes this manifests itself in what feels like a loss of faith. We feel angry and resentful towards God. It feels as if God has let us down, or even abandoned us. Prayer feels impossible or suddenly feels useless. God is absent.

The second is often a work of God himself. For no particular reason prayer becomes empty, familiar words and rituals lose their comfort, church becomes boring, other Christians irritating, and faith suddenly feels a ridiculous charade. Something seems to be sapping the energy of our faith and we feel dried up.

The first thing to say is that both experiences are normal and, for most people, inevitable. Spiritual writers often speak of these experiences as being like a desert.

In Christianity the desert is a place of discovery. The people of Israel are led through the desert into the promised land. Jesus begins his ministry being driven into the wilderness. The garden of resurrection is entered through Calvary. Even though the reasons for experiencing this desert of the faith are different, often the consequences are similar. If something has happened in our life to make God feel absent, God can use that experience to nurture in us a deeper understanding of his constant presence. If we are going through a period of spiritual dryness, even if we do not know the reason, we need to begin to trust that God is leading us through this experience to a deeper understanding of his overflowing love. What troubles me is that so many Christians are ill-prepared for the dark times that will inevitably come. I feel that many people not only give up on prayer, but give up on God when

they find themselves in the desert, because they were never told that this is a necessary part of faith.

Stephen Cottrell, Praying Through Life, pp. 127–8

>>4. Making a good confession

Many of us have to confess to not being good at confession! We are not sure what to confess or how to do it. We end up feeling more guilty than forgiven. How can we 'make a good confession'?

True guilt

There are plenty of sources of *false* guilt . . .

- > **from around us:** avoid making others feel guilty; and spot it when anyone is trying to control you by making you feel guilty.
- > **from below:** Satan accuses the saints 'day and night before our God' (Revelation 12.10). It usually results in a vague sense of guilt, without any clear focus. It is like being in a fog. Learn to spot it.
- > **from within:** too easily we spend time putting ourselves down and 'giving ourselves a hard time'. It's a form of *false* humility.

Holiness is all that reflects the character of God. Sin is all that contradicts his nature, not least our managing by ourselves.

How to repent

Let God do the accusing. This is the wonderful insight of the psalmist that can be a great source of wholeness for us:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalms 139.23-24 (NRSV)

Be open to God; don't dig around – let him do the searching. We are simply to open our hearts to this divine health check.

Making a good confession

Take the following steps:

- > *admit to God* what has been wrong;
- > *be specific* – and do not make excuses;

- > *hand it over to God* and let go of it: don't keep going over it;
- > *receive forgiveness: God's gift*. Hold on to that, not the past;
- > *go on your way rejoicing* – that you are forgiven.

Remember God's goal: it is not to make us feel guilty but to know we are forgiven, and so able to join in with his loving purposes.

>>5. Ten golden rules

1. Start. The hardest thing about prayer is beginning. So just start. Your longing for God, and your wanting to pray, are the beginning of a relationship that can grow and grow. Tell God that you want to know him and love him, and let him make the next move.
2. Invite the Holy Spirit to pray in you and to teach you to pray.
3. Find time to pray. Set aside special times for prayer.
4. Find people to pray with, especially your family, but also friends and work mates. We need one another's support. Remember, there is no such thing as private prayer, we are surrounded by the prayers of others.
5. Build prayer into the rhythms of life.
6. Make your home a place of prayer.
7. Find the way of praying that is right for you. Explore different ways of praying. Listen as well as speak; give thanks as well as make requests. Try to make sure your prayer is marked by adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication, but don't let particular methods get in the way.
8. Don't look for results.
9. Make your life a prayer. Use your times of prayer to make the whole of life prayerful.
10. Don't give up when it gets hard. Trying to pray is praying, and God is present even in the darkness.

Stephen Cottrell, Praying Through Life, pp. 132–3