

# Philip Yancey : Prayer - does it make any difference?

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*The reason why we pray is simply that we cannot help praying – William James*

These are extracts rather than comprehensive notes – this is a book of over 300pp, full of stories and reflections.

## 1. Our deepest longing

'According to Gallup polls, more Americans will pray this week than will exercise, drive a car, have sex, or go to work. Nine in ten of us pray regularly, and three out of four claim to pray every day.'<sup>5</sup>

*when I listened to public prayers in evangelical churches, I heard people telling God what to do, combined with thinly veiled hints on how others should behave. When I listened to prayers in more liberal churches, I heard calls to action, as if prayer were something to get past so we can do the real work of God's kingdom.* 6

'Christians in developing countries spend less time pondering the effectiveness of prayer and more time actually praying'.

## 2. View from above

'To explore the mystery of prayer I begin here, recalling the vantage I get from the summit of a mountain looking down or from an observatory looking up. Each provides a mere sliver of a glimpse of reality as God must see it. Like a flash of lightning, prayer exposes for a nanosecond what I would prefer to ignore: my own true state of fragile dependence.' 14

'Be still and know that I am God': the Latin imperative for 'be still' is *vacate*. As Simon Tugwell explains, 'God invites us to take a holiday [*vacation*], to stop being God for a while, and let him be God.' Too often we think of prayer as a serious chore, something that must be scheduled around other appointments.. We miss the point, says Tugwell: 'God is inviting us to take a break, to play truant. We can stop doing all those important things we have to do in our capacity as God, and leave it to him to be God.' 19

### The Peace of Wild Things

When despair grows in me  
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water,  
and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day—blind stars waiting with their  
light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry, from *Collected Poems*

*Prayer is the act of seeing reality from God's point of view.* 21

## 3. Just as we are

Confession is a good beginning. Pastor Haddon Robinson begins sermons with the prayer: 'God, if these people knew about me what you know about me, they wouldn't listen to a word I said'. 23

Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby settled on the single word 'helplessness' as the best summary of the heart attitude that God accepts as prayer. 'Only he who is helpless can truly pray', 26.

Nouwen: 'to pray is to walk in the full light of God, and to say simply, without holding back, 'I am human and you are God.' 27

*Prayer is a declaration of dependence upon God.* 27

## 4. The God who is

Buddhists use a prayer wheel. Tech-savvy Buddhists download prayers onto their computer hard drives, which spin around at 5400 revs per minute...

Jonathan Aitken compares his early relationship with God to that with a bank manager: 'I spoke to him politely, visited his premises intermittently, occasionally asked him for a small favour or overdraft to get myself out of difficulty, thanked him condescendingly for his assistance, kept up the appearance of being one of his reasonably reliable customers, and maintained superficial contact with him on the grounds that one of these days he might come in useful'. 37

'Every relationship spawns a kind of dance between the self and the other. How much more so with a holy, ineffable God who lives in a realm of spirit', 39.

'According to Einstein's theory of relativity, a person travelling at the speed of light would see the entire history of the universe pass by in a single instant. On the other hand, a God who encompasses the entire universe can 'view' what happens on earth and what happened 15,000 billion years ago simultaneously.. An omnipresent Being large enough to co-exist on the Andromeda galaxy and also on earth would experience time in a completely different way, experiencing at once both the history of earth and the billion-year-old history of the galaxy, as well as all years in between. If a star explodes in Andromeda, this Being takes note of it immediately, yet will also 'see' it from the viewpoint of an observer on earth many years later as *if it has just happened*. God is *outside* time..' 40

## 5. Coming together

*The main purpose of prayer is not to make life easier, nor to gain magical powers, but to know God.*

## 6. Why pray?

'Prayer is not a means of removing the unknown and unpredictable elements in life, but rather a way of including the unknown and unpredictable in the outworking of the grace of God in our lives' – Ray Anderson, 72.

*Prayers like gravel  
Flung at the sky's  
window, hoping to attract  
the loved one's  
attention...*

RS Thomas

## 7. Wrestling match

*Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an outdoor bazaar than the polite monologues of the church.*

Walter Wink

## 8. Partnership

'Be slow to pray. Praying puts us at risk of getting involved with God's conditions... Praying most often doesn't get us what we want but what God wants, something quite at variance with what we conceive to be in our best interests. And when we realize what is going on, it is often too late to go back' – Eugene Peterson, 98.

To think we control the results of prayer is a pagan concept. To think we are passive participants in God's action is a Hindu concept.

## 9. What difference does it make?

*Electricity will replace God. the peasants should pray to it; in any case they will feel its effects long before they feel any effect from on high.*

Lenin, 105

## 10. Does prayer change God?

*Prayer is the power by which that comes to pass which otherwise would not take place.* Andrew Murray, 121.

## 11. Ask, seek, knock

## 12. Yearning for fluency

*The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either.*

Henri Nouwen, 149.

### 13. Prayer grammar

'I see the cursing psams as an important model for how to deal with evil and injustice. I should not try to suppress my reaction of horror and outrage at evil. Nor should I try to take justice in my own hands. Rather, I should deliver those feelings, stripped bare, to God... God can 'handle' my unsuppressed rage. I may well find that my vindictive feelings need God's correction – but only by taking those feelings to God will I have that opportunity for correction and healing'. 165

#### Great prayers of the Bible:

- Genesis 18 – Abraham's plea for Sodom
- Exodus 15 – Moses' song to the Lord
- Exodus 33 – Moses meets with God
- 2 Samuel 7 – David's response to God's promises
- 1 Kings 8 – Solomon's dedication of the temple
- 2 Chronicles 20 – Jehoshaphat prays for victory
- Ezra 9 – Ezra's prayer for the people's sins
- Psalm 22 – a cry to God for help
- Psalm 104 – a prayer of praise
- Daniel 9 – Daniel's prayer for the salvation of Jerusalem
- Habakkuk 3 – a prophet's prayer of acceptance
- Matthew 6 – the Lord's prayer
- John 17 – Jesus' prayer for his disciples
- Colossians 1 – Paul's prayer of thanksgiving

Jesus lived before the invention of clocks and watches, and bells from the Roman forum tolled divisions in the day – at 6 am, 9 am, noon, 3pm and 6pm. Devout Jews adopted this schedule for their daily prayers, and early Christians continued the practice.

### 14. Tongue-tied

One of the masters of prayer, Teresa of Avila, admits to shaking the sand in in 16<sup>th</sup> century hourglass to make the hour go faster.

*Martin Luther: When I would speak and pray to God by myself, a hundred thousand hindrances at once intervene before I get at it. Then the devil can throw all sorts of reasons for delay in my path; he can block and hinder me on all sides; as a result, I go my way and never think of it again. Let him who has not experienced this only try it. Resolve to pray earnestly, and no doubt you will see how large an assortment of your own thoughts will rush in on you and distract you, so that you cannot begin aright. 176*

*I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the rattling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore. . . A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of tomorrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, a nothing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer.*

John Donne, 178

'Distractions are nearly always your real wants breaking in on your prayer for edifying but bogus wants. If you are distracted, trace your distraction back to the real desires it comes from and pray about these. When you are praying for what you really want you will not be distracted. People on sinking ships do not complain of distractions during their prayer'. Herbert McCabe, 181

The early church preferred that worshippers use written rather than spontaneous prayers, which allowed for control over doctrine during a time when heresies abounded... Until the C13th, most people both prayed and read aloud, even in private (Augsintre marvelled at the ability of Bishop Ambrose to hold a book in silence with his eyes running over the page: Was he trying to save his voice?). When the skill of reading silently became widespread it also led to a surge in individual, private prayer; until then believers viewed both prayer and reading as group activities, guided by professionals. 184

#### Prayer and personality type:

- F – creative exercises involving imagination, imagery, journaling
- T – taking scripture passage and asking basic investigative questions
- J – concrete, orderly system of meditation, using the senses to see, hear, smell the scenes of scripture
- P – action prayers, praying while fishing, hiking, swimming

## **15. The sound of silence**

## **16. Unanswered prayer – whose fault?**

George Muller claimed 50,000 answers to prayer in his storied life as head of a faith-based orphanage.

## **17. Unanswered prayer – living with the mystery**

Some, but not all, unanswered prayers trace back to a fault in the one who prays. Some, but not all, trace back to God's mystifying respect for human freedom and refusal to coerce. Some, but not all, trace back to dark powers contending against God's rule. Some, but not all, trace back to a planet marred with disease, violence and the potential for tragic accident. 224

CS Lewis – the real problem lies not in the fact of refusal but in the Bible's lavish promises. The main difficulty with unanswered prayers is that Jesus seemed to promise there need not be any. 226

He concludes that only when the one who prays does so as God's fellow-worker, demanding what is needed for the joint work, is the prayer answered. It is the prophet's, apostle's, missionary's, healer's prayer that is made with this confidence – something of the divine foreknowledge enters his mind.

## **18. Prayer and physical healing**

In one famous study, volunteers prayed for half of the 393 heart-attack patients at a San Francisco hospital. Among the group prayed for, significantly fewer died, most had a faster recovery requiring the use of fewer potent drugs, and none had to be put on life support.

People who regularly attend church have a 25% reduction in mortality – ie, they live longer – than people who are not churchgoers. 245.

## **19. What to pray for**

## **20. Prayer and me**

*The greatest tragedy in life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.* FB Meyer, 275.

Prayer is therapy - 'the very process of 'wasting time' with God changes me on the inside', 280  
'90% of praying is showing up' – Ben

## **21. Prayer and others**

At the univ of Louvain, teachers and students were in 1493 debating the topic: do 4 five-minute prayers on consecutive days stand a better chance of being answered than 1 20-min prayer? Is a prayer of 10 mins, said on behalf of 10 people, as efficacious as 10 1-minute prayers? The debate lasted 8 weeks, longer than it had taken Columbus to sail to America the previous year, 1492 – historian Paul Johnson.

## **22. Prayer and God**

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