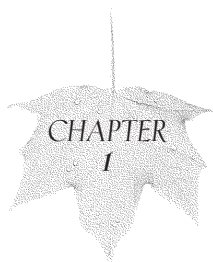


SECTION ONE



Beyond Asking



WHEN PRAYER STOPS “WORKING”

I SAT IN MY CAR, HIDDEN BY THE EVENING DARKNESS, FRUSTRATED at the way one man had disrupted the committee meeting I’d just left. (I’ll call him “X” because I was so irritated I wanted to X him from the committee.) He demanded to have his way and pushed us all so that our committee became polarized—*us* against X. With every new suggestion he made, we rose up to pounce on it. We were going nowhere, so I was glad when the meeting ended.

Now I was waiting in the car for my son to finish his meeting . . . and I was praying for X. Or what passed for prayer. I was ranting to God, “His negativity is ruining the committee. Change this man!”

Even as those words ricocheted in my mind, something happened. I heard the true attitude behind them: *This guy makes me mad. So, God, You should make him do things my way.* Not for the first time, I saw what a *me*-centered prayer I was capable of offering. I was judging X by how he made *me* feel. Because I was frustrated and angry, I had decided on the best course of action. *I* was telling God how to execute my plan. *Wow*, I caught my breath. *Who do I think I am—judging this man, then telling God what to do?*

I let out my frustration with a sigh and shut my eyes. I needed to

still my own thoughts and get quiet. I laid my hands in my lap and relaxed my hunched shoulders. A bit of the tension evaporated. I knew I needed to offer a different kind of prayer—selfless, not bossy.

I took a few deep breaths and opened my hands, palms upward in front of me. *He is Yours, God. I leave Him to You.* Breathing more calmly, I allowed quietness to come over my soul and repeated those familiar words: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

I inhaled deeply, praying, *More of Jesus.* And I let that breath go: *Less of me.* My blood was no longer pounding. The evening air felt renewing. Much calmer, I was grateful for the companionship of God and the chance to ponder God’s will for X. (The idea that God might have a positive plan for X was still quite a stretch for me.)

For several years I’d been practicing this sort of contemplative prayer—the kind in which you sit before God, simply enjoying His presence. In the heat and pressure of daily living, it’s so easy to forget God’s presence and slide back into old self-centered habits. But how satisfying to be able to return to this ancient practice, used by Christians for two millennia. I could sense order being restored and peace coming back to my soul. Instead of the unsteady, vengeful feelings that had filled me, I sensed a holy quiet.

AN ANCIENT PRACTICE

For many years of my Christian life, my prayers had been filled with what I wanted. Nothing in my evangelical Christian training had taught me about this quiet sort of prayer—even though the early Christians, church fathers, and saints through the ages, both great and unknown, have practiced contemplation.

Contemplative prayer, in its simplest form, is prayer in which you still your thoughts and emotions and focus on God Himself. This puts you in a better state to be aware of God’s presence, and it makes you better able to hear God’s voice correcting, guiding, and directing you. Instead of coming with a “to do” list for God, you come with no agenda. The fundamental idea is simply to enjoy the companionship of God, stilling your own thoughts so you can listen should God choose to speak. For this reason, contemplative prayer is sometimes referred to as “the prayer of silence.”

As I learned to pray this way, I discovered I *liked* prayer! If I was

frustrated, distracted, or confused, I could reconnect with God. There I could find peace and strength. Instead of being stuck in a limited perspective about a person or situation, I would find myself open to a higher view that allowed me to *respond* with patient wisdom instead of *react* out of my emotions.

Eventually, I understood why the inner transformation took place. I would begin my time of contemplation focused on my desires, demands, and needs, saying, *I want*. But by fixing my mind’s eye on the God who loved me, something changed. I let go of people, circumstances, myself, and my feelings, and was freed to fix my attention on eternal things. Soon I found myself saying, *God, knowing You is enough for me*.

The change was amazing. I sensed the “peace that passes understanding” which had usually eluded me.

GOD AND MR. X

As calm and order returned on that evening of my committee meeting, I put forth a question to God in the quiet: *What do I need to know about X?*

When I ask God questions this way, ideas sometimes come to me. Other times nothing new comes, but the sense of being reconnected with God is more than enough for me.

In a moment, a favorite breath prayer came to me: “Show me this person’s heart.” (I couldn’t resist adding, “if he has one.”) For a few silent minutes, I relaxed and let that prayer rest inside me.

Just then, my son Jeff hopped into the car and said he needed to stop at the drugstore. As we drove, I brought up X’s name. Jeff mentioned that X had told stories of fighting in Vietnam. “He said he’d felt helpless, with no control over his life,” Jeff filled in. “Sometimes he had to obey orders that he hated obeying.” When Jeff walked into the drugstore, I was left alone with God again. I remembered how this man was also laid off from a large firm where he’d been head of the computer department. I thought of his son, too—a great kid, but not cooperative.

Closing my eyes, I asked God again: *What do I need to know?* In the stillness, I saw something I hadn’t considered before. *This guy had lost control of so many things—his past, his career, his son. Did*

that explain why he was so obviously determined to control things now, including the committee?

Jeff returned to the car, and by the time we got home, a compromise to the committee's dilemma had come to me: *Give him a small portion of the project to control and let the committee run the rest of it.* I called the chair, who liked the idea. In the end, it worked out to everyone's satisfaction. Sometime later, I also realized I had not only experienced peace but, as a result, had been a *peacemaker*—by accident. This intrigued me because my usual method of operation (being a second-born) is *not* to bring peaceful resolution, but to throw dust in the air so I could get away with something I want. (I think this came from messing up my older sister's room and then having to throw the adults off my trail: "Oh . . . her stuff's messed up? Could one of her friends have done it?") I have always marveled at those who can calmly resolve conflict. I've tried to be a peacemaker but failed. This time I'd actually *forged peace!*

What mattered more to me, though, was the improved condition of my heart. I'd become interested in doing what God wanted instead of simply complaining. I no longer wanted to turn the other way when I saw this man, as I'd often done. In future meetings, I felt compassion for him because I had seen his heart. It was another step in the growth toward Christlikeness that I have wanted.

WHEN THE SOUL NEEDS TO BE RESTORED

Over and over, I experience this sort of challenge, correction, and empowerment from God. To a great extent, it has grown out of the practice of contemplation. It involved a major shift—from constantly asking God to change and fix my world to resting in His presence and allowing Him to reshape me from within.

This has been a slow transition for me. I'd been taught many methods of prayer, but most of them involved promoting my agenda. For many years as a Christian, I never sought God *just for God Himself*. Surrendering my old habits of yammering away at God has not come easily. But as I've experienced the peace of God's company, I've found myself turning to "the prayer of silence" as often as possible—even in small snatches of time, as I did in my car that night. Now I wonder how I could have managed my life without it.

Why have Christians regarded contemplative prayer as such an invaluable part of their lives for centuries?

One of Jesus’ greatest promises was this: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20), but we may not experience this. Instead, we keep praying, “God, be with us.” That’s because we’re distracted by life’s thousand demands and by our habit of filling in empty time slots with entertainment. Our mind flashes from one thing to another, always occupied. A weekly visit to church can’t begin to penetrate this busyness. Contemplation reconnects us with God in the midst of this scatteredness. Life pulls me in so many directions—between the demands of my work, my husband’s plans, the kids’ needs, commitments outside our home, dreams I want to pursue. . . . I may say I’m “thirsty for God as the deer is for water,” but at the moment I need to get my hair cut. However, when I pause to contemplate and be with God, I sense that this God who holds the universe together can also hold me together. In the quiet, I recall how God has helped me in the past. Without the clamor of demands around me, I remember that I am one God *so loves*.

As I experienced contemplative prayer more and more, I sensed a compelling hunger for God and to spend more unstructured time pondering the heart of God. So I decided to make a habit of attending monthly one-day retreats sponsored by a retreat center several towns away. During the third one, I cut out of the sessions early. Outdoors, I climbed down a steep bank that led to a creek running through the property. Stepping on stones, I made my way out to the middle of the flowing water to sit on a huge rock. I didn’t say or think anything. It was enough to sit in the sun, listening to the rushing water and lifting my face to God. I didn’t have to *do* anything. The only thing required was to *be* . . . and to enjoy the attention of the only One who could give living water to my soul. It seemed like the best place in the world to be.

In between retreats, my days became cluttered with work projects to complete, a household to run, teenagers needing rides to their many events. I longed for those retreat days. I longed to experience a *gatheredness of being* on that rock in the middle of the stream.

As I dressed on the morning of the next retreat, I put on shoes that would help me maneuver the climb and clothes I didn’t mind getting

snagged by thorn bushes. No matter how interesting the retreat leader would be, I'd skip out to "soak" in the presence of God. Making the ninety-minute drive was a physical manifestation of my spiritual task. Leaving behind my mental trappings (escaping home and work), I was free to trek (the steep path down to the stream) to a place of *collectedness* (the silence and stability of the rock in the rushing creek).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE SOUL

When I've talked about having moments of solitude and silence, a few people have eyed me skeptically. Wasn't I talking about "escapism" or having some sort of "mystical" experience?

Contemplation is not an escape from the world or trying to reach lofty spiritual states. Rather, it is a way to face the needs of the hungry soul through simply *being with* God.

The following story illustrates the dynamic of contemplation well: An old peasant went every day into the village church and knelt in prayer. When asked what was wrong and what would make him do such a thing, he said, "I just look at God and God looks at me."¹ He wasn't escaping or searching for ecstasy, just enjoying the presence of God.

The simple practice of contemplation creates a bond with God in which God can heal the scatteredness of our lives and these other unhealthy spiritual states you may be experiencing as well.

Spiritual dryness. My friend Don reflects on "the good old days" of the university fellowship group he attended while in college. In their Bible studies, he and other college students marveled at God's truths, and on weekends they helped each other move. It wasn't unusual for them to take up collections for whoever needed money. No matter where Don goes to church now, he is never moved as he was in those days.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin now," Don says. "My faith isn't gone, but it's been a long time since I've seen God anywhere. I can't even say I want to obey God. I wish I did . . ." In his words I hear a dry, withered soul asking, "Has God my rock forgotten me?" (Psalm 42:9).

To sit in silence before God restores the soul. We don't expect tingling feelings but recollect God as revealed in scriptural truths: God

never leaves us, God knocks at our heart’s door, God’s limitless love and direction is always available. God does not change even though our circumstances do.

When our soul is dry, contemplation connects us with the One who “is eternal [so] His love can have no end; because He is infinite, it has no limit; because He is holy, it is the quintessence of all spotless purity; because He is immense, His love is an incomprehensibly vast, bottomless, shoreless sea before which we kneel in joyful silence.”² His love waters our thirsty soul.

Guilt and shame. Our unfinished business with God disturbs us within and won’t leave us alone. Recurring sins don’t go away. Feelings of inadequacy never end. Lack of purity plagues us. These things make us afraid to face God in prayer. Who wants to see a disapproving look on the face of God? Uneasy questions drive us away from God: *Shouldn’t I feel ashamed of asking God’s forgiveness over and over for the same sin? Is God tired of me? Is there hope for me? When will all these sermons click and I’ll finally stop snapping at my kids or yelling at other drivers on the road?*

In contemplation I envision myself as the lost sheep whom the Shepherd has come to find (see Luke 15:1-7). I ask these questions as the Shepherd carries me home on his shoulders: *I’ve been found, but am I still welcome? Am I still included in the fold? Am I still a vessel God can use?* I’m reassured to be sitting on the shoulders of a Shepherd who’s planning to throw a party for this bumbling sheep (see Luke 15:6).

Lack of direction and purpose. When I’m not fitting in or understanding what’s going on around me, I need to hear the directing voice of the Father.

A. W. Tozer, one of the most influential evangelists of our century, wrote, “Most of us go through life praying a little, planning a little, jockeying for position, hoping but never quite certain of anything, and always secretly afraid that we will miss the way.”³ In uncertain times, I want to trust God that my life will count, that God will use me, weak as I am. I become more uncertain as I see the skills, opportunities, success, and faith others have—and I begin to compare myself and my circumstances, until I’m telling myself, *I can’t . . . and I don’t have . . .*

A few minutes of quiet with God allow me to soak in the biblical truth that I am one God *so loves*, possessing “a hope and a future” (see John 3:16, Jeremiah 29:11). As I absorb God’s truthful words, my doubts and fears are challenged. A sense of trust develops. In the quiet I can rest in God, who knows what’s going on even when I do not. When we’re stuck in these inner currents, a heart relationship with God does not seem possible. We feel disconnected. But when our soul listens, we can regain sight of God as the One who is eager to nurture us and get us up and walking again.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS

At the root of these problems of disconnectedness is the fact that my spiritual life is about me and what I want. It is not centered upon God and what God wants. We understand prayer to be mostly about asking God for things, and when God doesn’t seem to answer, we are wounded, disappointed, and eventually hardened toward God. Why didn’t God play fair?

Once, at a retreat, a woman complained to her discussion group that if she had known I would mention prayer so often, she would not have come. She’d prayed for a depressed friend and for her seriously ill mother. The friend committed suicide and her mother didn’t get well. “What good has prayer ever done?” she asked the group. Many people feel this way — Why bother? —but they never verbalize it as honestly as this woman did. She had goals about fixing and mending her broken world, and in her eyes it seemed God was not interested in her goals. Therefore, for her, God didn’t work.

How do you view God? The way you understand God, and the way you understand how God works, matters.

I used to view God as something like a magic genie, responsible for cleaning up life’s messes and keeping the pantry full. At other times, I viewed God as a giant aspirin to relieve my aches and pains. In essence, I reduced God to a servant or a vending machine. I put my coin of faith (prayer) into the slot and expected to find the prize (happiness, achievement, success) in the tray at the bottom.

Yet I never saw that my prayer was based only on my thoughts and desires. I put myself in the center of things and said, *This is what seems right and good to me, so it must be the best thing. And now,*

God, I want it. Use your power to make this happen. I was proud of my twentysome-page prayer request list—which amounted to a spiritualized “to do” list for God. Yes, I praised and thanked God. But then I began giving God orders: Change this man! Now would be the preferred time for You to do this!

WHO CONTROLS YOUR LIFE?

Underneath it all, the heart vies for position with God, turning good spiritual teachings to its own advantage. For example, I used to love phrases like “Prayer is the key that unlocks the storehouses of God’s riches.” I was hungry for those riches and imagined I could use prayer to get them. I missed the point—the riches are God Himself, not the goodies I want God to provide. Turn-of-the-century writer Evelyn Underhill pinpointed the problem: “We mostly spend [our] lives conjugating three verbs: to *want*, to *have*, and to *do*. Craving, clutching and fussing, we are kept in perpetual unrest.”⁴ My jabbering prayers have been full of what I *want*, what I think I should *have*, and what I want God to *do*.

It’s no surprise that these demanding prayers go unanswered. Then the legalistic voice inside begins to say, *God is ignoring your prayers because you’re not good enough*. If we’re eager or desperate enough to pursue prayer, we intensify our efforts toward God, resulting in practices like these:

Formula praying. We work hard to find the “correct method” to persuade God, constantly searching for new formulas for prayer. We get excited over new and better techniques, gadgets, or systems to increase the effectiveness of prayers.

Devotion to the tools. We talk about “believing in prayer,” indicating how much we put our faith in our prayers and their “power.” (I no longer *believe in prayer*; I believe in God alone. Prayer is a vivid, varied place—a state of my soul—in which I connect with God.)

You may think that differentiating between devotion to God and devotion to spiritual tools is a small thing, but this important issue caused Jesus to be at odds with the Pharisees. The sect of the Pharisees focused on spiritual practices, such as ceremonial washing and rigid Sabbath-keeping. They looked down on Jesus because He did

not. Jesus focused on God Himself. This frustrated and angered the Pharisees because they used “spiritual tools” to gain God’s favor—and here was Jesus ignoring their formulas and gyrations, focusing on the love of God, and speaking about God with such confidence.

Focusing on the “tools” of our faith is a sign of self-absorption: *Have I prayed today? Did I pray long enough, sincerely enough for it to “count” with God?* With all good intentions, we can become navel-gazers, focusing on our efforts. Oswald Chambers, author of the classic work *My Utmost for His Highest*, says, “Beware of being obsessed with consistency instead of being devoted to God.”⁵ When I eyeball my own performance too closely, my spirituality is about *me*, not about God.

Pastor Peter Lord, author of *Hearing God*, challenges us to test ourselves with this question:

If God gave you nothing but himself, would you be satisfied? The answer reveals whether you love God for himself, or for what you hope He will do for you. When you find yourself no longer enjoying the presence of God, when you find your prayers are limited to asking for things for yourself, you are in a hurry to get answers for your needs, when Christian ministry becomes the all-important thing in your life, then there is the subtle danger that you are using God for your ends.⁶

In the end, it comes down to this: Either we are struggling to control our own lives—or we are learning to rest in God and take our cues from Him.

INTO THE HEART OF GOD

I’ve introduced you to a kind of prayer that waits silently, focused on God and asking nothing. Yes, it’s true that asking is also part of the Christian life. Jesus asked the Father for many things (see, for example, John 17).

First and foremost, however, prayer is about *aligning ourselves with the will of a powerful, loving God*, not using “the right phrases” to persuade, cajole, or manipulate God. This is not an employee-boss

relationship, in which we never know when we’ll be terminated, and so seek to get as much out of the boss as we can while we still have a chance. The spirit of Christian prayer is the attitude of *surrendering ourselves to be vessels of His good purposes*.

When we continue to use prayer to ask for things, something happens inside. Our faith is reduced, as author Flannery O’Connor put it, to little more than “an electric blanket.”⁷ We pull it out hoping God will cover the cold, exposed spots of our lives. That’s all. God listens and smiles . . . but will not become our divine genie. And we become disillusioned with God. Imagining He has let us down, we become estranged from Him. In a culture that teaches us to perform for rewards, prayer becomes one more place of defeat and God is one more disappointment. We may even keep going through the motions spiritually—going to church, helping others—but in our heart we wonder, *If God is good, wouldn’t He give me the good things I want? Because He doesn’t, either God is not good, or I’m hopeless.*

We come to a dismal place because we misunderstand prayer as a means to have our desires fulfilled instead of a place to encounter the compassionate, all-seeking God. As we understand prayer correctly, we move from devotion to the *tools* to devotion to the *Master*. This difference is described well in the following analogy by Tony Campolo:

There are two ways that I can tell you how to get from [wherever you are] to Eastern College where I teach. I can give you a map that charts out the route for you to take. With such a map you might or might not get there, depending on how good you are at reading maps [and whether roads are closed]. The other option I can offer is to get into your car, sit beside you, and direct you as we go along.⁸

Are you a map reader or a companion of God? Learning to converse with God—sharing my true hurts and sensing the heartbeat of God—is so much better than being devoted to prayer as a formula. God created us not to make us map-reading, rote followers, but to

have a love relationship with Him. No one's voice or opinion is more important than the voice of the One who loves us most and best. Jesus told us, "[The Spirit of truth] lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:17), as well as "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14: 20). Even when we have strayed as the nation of Judah did, we can count on God's constant, loving guidance: "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isaiah 30:21).

CONNECTING WITH THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

One of the settings in which your ears are likely to "hear a voice behind you" is in contemplation because it's about being with God, the lover of your soul. "The point of prayer," Oswald Chambers affirms, "is not to get answers from God, but to have oneness with Him. If we pray only because we want answers, we will become irritated and angry with God."⁹ Picture a child constantly asking a parent for things. This badgering not only annoys the parent, but the poor child is miserable. We can be children of God who love God for who He is — not for what He gives us — and experience an end to our dryness and disillusionment.

When being with God counts, we no longer come up with clever plans and then ask God to give us the strength and know-how to accomplish this course of action we've already chosen. Prayer becomes a meeting of the hearts as I rest in God's presence. Finding a good plan is not my chief goal, but rather living in the company of God is.

The purpose of this writing is to help you learn how to meet with God in life-transforming encounters in which your heart comes to rest in His presence. As we explore contemplative prayer together, expect God to invade all of your life. As you become more focused on His presence, you will find yourself conversing with God throughout the day. This is because the silence and solitude practiced in contemplation creates an interior quiet and calm that permeates mundane activities.

This living from the heart of God teaches you to see people as Jesus saw people. For example, while riding in the back seat of my car, my friend Liz saw some boys wearing handcuffs in the car next to us. I saw them too, and my first thought was, *Uh oh. What did*

these guys do? But Liz said, “I should pray for these boys. I wonder what’s going on in their lives.” This is how prayer becomes the main business of your life.¹⁰ You don’t go for hours in forgetfulness of God and God’s work on the earth. Even when you have nothing important to say to God, you are satisfied being with Him—coming and going, working and resting.

REWARDS OF GOD-CENTERED PRAYER

When prayer is a place to delight in God, we find ourselves hungry for God. We imitate Jesus, running off for solitude: “At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place” (Luke 4:42). Imagine Jesus momentarily leaving His mission and the demands of the crowds to set out into the barely light, still-damp out of doors—after an exhausting day of driving out demons and healing people. Why didn’t He sleep in? It would seem that Jesus longed for God. Parents of preschoolers know this longing for adult conversation. At night you tuck your children in bed, feeling just a little bit of relief because now you can converse with your spouse without interruptions.

Contemplative prayer opens us to a conversation with One we love, and so prayer becomes something we *like* to do. Like jet-skiing, reading a detective novel, or visiting an old friend, you don’t have to gear up for it by trying hard to think “God thoughts” for a few minutes. We become completely, authentically ourselves with God—with no need to impress.

And God becomes real in us.

Have you been longing for depth and authenticity with God? Do you need the renewing power of God in you? Do you want purpose and daily direction? In the course of this book we will explore the methods and benefits of contemplative prayer, which opens us up to the wonder of God’s presence. If prayer has stopped “working” for you, if you want to know the reality of God, I invite you now to explore contemplative prayer and the lifestyle that allows you to experience God’s presence. This sense of God’s presence will also change you (something we will explore in the next chapter) and give life and empowerment to your soul.

Isn’t that what you’ve been wanting?

NOTES

1. Avery Brooke, "What Is Contemplation?" *Weavings*, July/August 1992, p. 7.
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3. Tozer, p. 63.
4. *Great Devotional Classics: Selections from the Writings of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Douglas Steere (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1961), p. 10.
5. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today's Language*, ed. James Reimann (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publications, 1992), November 14 entry.
6. Peter Lord, *Hearing God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), pp. 194-195.
7. Letter to Louise Abbot as recorded in *O'Connor Collected Works* (The Library of America, 1988), p. 1110.
8. Tony Campolo, *How to Be Pentecostal without Speaking in Tongues* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), p. 65.
9. Chambers, August 6 entry.
10. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 34.