



Turning Your Thoughts Into Prayers

By Jan Johnson

ITOLD THE MINISTER I'd be glad to distribute brochures door-to-door. But when he handed them to me, I thought, *I'd love to go home, curl up, and read a book.* All my introverted, shy tendencies oozed forth. But because I'd agreed to distribute the material, I gritted my teeth and ventured up the walk to the first house.

As a young mother appeared at the door balancing a toddler on her hip, I slipped into my habit of turning whatever's going on inside me into a prayer. Seeing the weary mom triggered it, I'm sure, because I felt like such a misfit when my children were small.

I showed her the brochure with the service times. *Give her patience, God.*

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This little one isn't potty-trained. When I handed her the pen with the church's name on it, she smiled. *What a glowing smile—make yourself real to her.* As I left the house, I saw that even though my official task was to distribute literature and pens, my real task was to pray for everyone I encountered.

Soon I began enjoying this new role as pray-er so much that I stopped at homes

*Prayer can be as natural
as breathing.*

abandoned due to damage from a recent earthquake and prayed for the people who used to live there. *Living with relatives can be wonderful and difficult, God. Sustain them.* This task of going door-to-door, which started out as a dreaded duty, became a fun and interesting experience with prayer.

We make the command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5: 17, *King James Version*) more difficult and mysterious than it needs to be. Perhaps it's a simple matter of making prayer the "main business of our lives," a phrase Richard Foster uses in *Celebration of Discipline*. When prayer becomes our major life activity, we experience what it means to offer a sacrifice of praise to God *continually* (Hebrews 13:15), *devote* ourselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2), and pray "in the Spirit on *all* occasions" (Ephesians 6:18). So many times the word *pray* is linked with words such as "always," "everything," "constantly," and even "night and day" (Colossians 4:12, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, Romans 1:9, 10; 1 Thessalonians 3:10). Our perpetual self-talk—the chatter in our head as we commute, prepare sandwiches, or do exercises—can be transformed into a continual conversation with God.

Does this conjure up pictures of traffic accidents occurring as people skim their prayer lists while driving? It doesn't have to be that regimented. We can turn the thoughts in our head, the longings of our heart, and the urgings of our spirit into prayer.

For example, I felt annoyed each time I looked at the basketball goal in our backyard. My friend's son Justin had pulled the hoop down, and when it broke, he laughed and said, "I guess it's not the kind that pops up." We hadn't found time to repair it, which meant our family had one less activity to enjoy. Every time I looked at it, I felt annoyed with Justin. Then I felt annoyed with myself. Justin recently returned home after receiving treatment in a drug rehabilitation center. His parents had their hands full. Why couldn't I use the broken backboard as a reminder to pray for Justin? So I did.

What We Can Pray

If we weave prayer throughout the day, greater intimacy with God is bound to develop. When we run out of things to say to God, we can bring up whatever or whomever is in front of us. That is why I prayed for the mom while passing out brochures that day.

But what do we pray? Whatever piece of God's will we understand. Some of his will we don't see clearly, but much of it we do. My friend Karen prayed for God's will when she was attracted to a married coworker. Whenever she was around him or thought about him, she prayed for scriptural truths to become real in his life. "I prayed that he would be a loving husband and a firm, gentle father," she says. "I prayed that God would use him to advance the kingdom. I prayed that I would figure out how to be his friend. It was pretty hard to flirt with him when I was praying for him that way, and my feelings soon returned to normal." In the same way, we can pray we will consider others' needs (Philippians 2:4), examine ourselves for sin (2 Corinthians 13:5), or fulfill our part in helping others come to know Christ (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Breath Prayers

But how do we focus our thoughts so quickly? One helpful method is the time-proven "breath prayer" format, repeating a prayer phrase that has great meaning. For example, when situations grieve me

but I am powerless to change them, I find myself praying, "Into thy hands."

- I am afraid of upcoming surgery—Into thy hands.
- I don't want my job to end—Into thy hands.
- I want this person to love you, but he doesn't—Into thy hands.

Offering this breath prayer is slowly transforming my self-talk and attitude. I'm less selfish and more open to God's will.

To those of us who have spent our energies reciting long lists of prayer requests, breath prayers may seem hackneyed and infantile, but they aren't. Breath prayers are so simple that they're revolutionary. Breath prayers are very different from "vain repetitions," which

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Jesus described as lofty, impressive recitations made for others to notice (Matthew 6:7, *KJV*). Breath prayers are quiet groanings of the heart that become more meaningful as we use them.

We need this simplicity in a culture that wows people with words—adorning them with graphics, using them to manipulate and convince. Breath prayers resemble the unembellished approach that Jesus recommended when he spoke of offering a simple yes or no (Matthew 5:33–37). For too long, we've thought that short, simple prayers are not sophisticated enough. What a relief to grow into a relationship with God where we don't have to go on and on explaining everything to him. We can pray simply and enjoy being with him in peace.

A breath prayer often flows out of a Bible passage. One time while pondering Jesus' prayer in John 17, I settled into verse 23, especially the last phrase, "You have loved me." This verse affirms that the Lord loves his disciples with the same kind of love God the Father has for his

Son. When I need reassurance of God's love, I've found myself saying to God, "You have loved me."

Here are a few other breath prayers that have become common for me.

Show me the heart of this person. This prayer can ignite in us the compassion of Jesus toward people that others ignore (Matthew 20:34; Mark 1:41). As I look into the faces of my two normal, yet stubborn teenagers, my self-talk turns bitter: *Why can't this kid cooperate?* or, *Who asked for such a stubborn kid?* Instead, I'm learning to turn my thoughts into a prayer, asking God to show me what's going on in the hearts of these near-adults. I don't get telegrams from God, but this prayer puts me in a frame of mind to listen to my kids better or watch what God might be telling me through their body language or speech. This prayer has a way of wringing the self-importance, laziness, or grouchiness out of our own attitude and giving us a heart for others.

Help me to see how I can spur this person on toward love and good works is my personalized version of Hebrews 10:24. This breath prayer came about one day when I was having lunch with an old friend I hadn't seen for some time. She is one of the funniest people I know, and as I drove to the restaurant, I giggled about all the silliness we'd enjoyed in the past. When I arrived, however, I found that she was in a gloomy mood, needing me to listen and love her. It took about ten minutes for me to slow into her gear (and resist resenting that we weren't going to have a rowdy lunch!). Throughout our time together, my "spur-this-person-on" breath prayer helped me listen to her, empathize with her, and be the friend I needed to be.

I also offer this prayer when I meet people I admire and feel like cooing over them: "You're just such a wonderful Christian and I would love to be more like you." When I ask God to show me how I can spur this person on toward love and good works, I am reminded that my hero is also a struggling child of God.

As we incorporate prayer into all the moments of our lives, conversation with God becomes part of the rhythm of daily life and a backdrop to all activity. Then our hearts will become private chapels where we can enjoy rich fellowship with God all day long. ■