

Chapter 1

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

The Vital Connection

“ To Quote

How do you pray a prayer so filled with faith that it can move a mountain? By shifting the focus from the size of your mountain to the sufficiency of the mountain mover, and by stepping forward in obedience.

—Bill Hybels, modern pastor in Chicago

Every meditation, every act of mental prayer, even if it may have some immediate practical purpose, should also bring us into direct communion with God. This is the true fruit of meditation.

—Thomas Merton, 20th century Trappist monk (1915-1968)

R Real Life

Julia had lived a rough life. When she was eight years old, her mom had died in a car accident. She, her older brother, and her dad had stuck it out together through the tough years. However, when her brother went off to college, her dad got up the nerve to begin dating again. Julia didn't like his dad's girlfriend, but she just couldn't tell him that. Because he was dating, he had less time to spend with her, and she was left alone a lot. She missed her mom immensely, and she was having a hard time dealing with it now that another woman was in the picture. Julia turned to the only people she could talk to about all this, her friends. She called them all

the time to hang out so she could get out of the house. However, each time she tried to run toward her friends, she felt more distant from them.

Julia tried to talk to her friends about her issues, but the more she talked about it, the more stressed out she became. Her friends started to avoid her because she was dumping her emotions and frustrations on them. They suggested that she spend time talking things out with God. This seemed like the right thing to say, but Julia didn't find any comfort in it. Prayer seemed like such an awkward thing. It was so much easier to talk to her friends. She felt like God was hard to relate to because she couldn't talk to Him face-to-face. She also wondered if God even cared or if God would be upset if she expressed her true feelings to Him. If she prayed in the wrong way, would God reject her too? She couldn't handle another "no," so she decided to avoid talking to God altogether.

What Julia needs is a friend who will help her learn how to relate to God. As Christians, prayer is one of those things that we feel we should understand, but when it comes down to it, prayer is incredibly complex. Jesus' own disciples once asked Him, "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Luke 11:1). Those closest to Jesus needed to learn the intimate connection of prayer. It's with this same humility that we should approach the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation.

YL Your Life

1. Have you ever gone to your friends with your problems instead of going to God? What happened?

2. What are the obstacles in your life that keep you from spending time with God in prayer?

3. What do you like the most about spending time with God?



Understanding the Disciplines

In its simplest form, prayer is communication with God. Communication involves both talking and listening, so does prayer. Sometimes we speak to God. Sometimes we stop and listen so God can speak to our hearts. Other times we just sit together with God, not needing to say anything at all.

Before we dive into the particulars about prayer, we need to understand with whom we are talking. When Jesus prayed, He directed His prayers to “Father.” Sometimes Jesus used the phrase, “*Abba*, Father.” This particular phrase shows us that Jesus had a close, intimate relationship with God, the Father. Christians can also develop this same intimate relationship with the Father. So when we pray, we can think of God as being the best dad ever. He loves, protects, provides, disciplines, cares, and wants to listen to His children. Whether or not we have a good relationship with our biological dads, none of them are perfect. However, our heavenly Father is, and He loves us and wants the best for us. Talk to Him openly about everything. Trust Him to care for you.

There are tons of examples of people who prayed to our Father throughout the Bible. Abraham and God had many conversations about the covenant. Isaac prayed that his wife would have a baby. Moses and God talked back and forth about how God should deal with Israel's sin. David poured out his heart to God in the Psalms. Jonah even prayed while in a fish!

One of our greatest examples of prayer is Jesus. Jesus often removed himself from crowds to spend time alone with His Father. He taught His disciples how to pray in what we call the Lord's Prayer. Right before being arrested and taken to the Cross, Jesus prayed for himself, for His disciples, and for us who would become His disciples in the future. Even Jesus' last words on the Cross were spoken to His Father.

One of the unique things about our God is that He is omnipresent. This means that God is everywhere. Particularly, though, God is present when we pray. God's presence lives in Christians through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit actually enables you to pray.

So, what kinds of things should Christians say to God? The Book of Psalms is a book of prayers that helps us understand what our prayer life should look like. First, our prayers should start with praising God. *"Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom"* (Psalm 145:3). In Psalm 32, we see that prayer also includes confessing our sin to God. Sometimes we pray telling God when we are upset and frustrated. These types of prayers, as seen in Psalms 22 and 69, are called laments. Don't be afraid to tell God how you feel. He wants you to be honest with Him. Sometimes in prayer, we make commitments to God as seen in Psalm 25: *"Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your*

truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25:4-5). Prayers should end by thanking God for the things He has given us. "*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever*" (Psalm 136:1).

The Bible also talks a lot about how to make prayer requests. God is our Provider. In his first letter, John said, "*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us. And if we know he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him*" (1 John 5:14-15). What a promise!

God answers all of our prayer requests. Sometimes, when we ask for the wrong thing or with the wrong motives, God will say no. Sometimes the timing isn't right, and God will tell us to wait. However, if what you ask of God is within His will and the timing is right, God will give you what you ask for. We shouldn't be afraid to talk to our Father about the things we need. In fact, we have a responsibility in prayer to work with God to determine what happens in our world. Paul said that we are "*God's fellow workers*" (1 Corinthians 3:9). We can change the world through prayer!

Sometimes we don't know what to pray for. Paul said, "*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will*" (Romans 8:26-27). Have you ever wanted to pray for something but you didn't know what to say? The Holy Spirit somehow interprets your thoughts and expresses them in a way that prays in God's will.

If prayer is communication with God, then meditation is communion with God. Communion basically means hanging

out with God and focusing on the things of God. The idea is to take time away from the craziness of the world to rest in the Lord. Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). Jesus wants us to be with Him.

However, throughout history, humans tend to have other people relate to God for them. In Moses’ day, the people were too afraid to talk to God. They said to Moses, *“Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die”* (Exodus 20:19). In the rest of the Old Testament, instead of relating to God personally, God’s people had a mediator—a prophet, priest, or king—relate to God for them. This sentiment continues today as some Christians would rather their pastor speak to God on their behalf instead of learning how to relate to God personally. Remember, though, Jesus wants each of us to spend time with Him.

So, when we meditate, we spend time with God by focusing on the things of God. The primary subject of meditation is God himself as portrayed in Scripture. When the Lord made Joshua the leader of Israel, He said: *“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything in it”* (Joshua 1:8). We meditate on God’s Word so we can apply it to our lives. *Lectio divina* is one method of meditating on God’s Word. In this practice, we allow God’s Word to speak to us. We select a short passage of Scripture and read it several times to see which words or phrases stand out to us and what those words mean for our life.

Another way to meditate on Scripture is to enter into the story of the Bible by using your imagination. For example, if you were to meditate on Jesus’ miracle of feeding the 5,000,

you would place yourself in the story. Would you be a disciple, the boy with the fish, or one of the people in the crowd? What would it have been like to listen to Jesus talking for hours? What feelings do you have as you see the few fish and loaves of bread multiplied to feed thousands?

Lastly, we can use Scripture to help us meditate on God's character and His works. Throughout the Bible, God tells us to "remember" different events. "*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt*" (Deuteronomy 15:15). "*Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced*" (1 Chronicles 16:12). "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David*" (2 Timothy 2:8). Remembering is a way of focusing on things of the past. Not only can we remember who God is and what He's done in Scripture, we can also meditate on who God has been to us personally and the amazing things He's done in our own lives. Try journaling on a regular basis to remember how God has interacted with you.

We can also meditate on things in our world. We can meditate on nature in order to better understand the amazing work of the Creator. Thomas Merton, a 20th century expert on meditation, suggests we meditate on current news events. We meditate on these in order to understand how God is at work in the world around us. Lastly, we can use music as a way to meditate. Music has the power to move our hearts and focus our thoughts. Contemporary Christian music and hymns can provide a guided meditation on God and how He relates to us.

Because meditation is personal, it will look different from person to person because each of us has a different personality. However, the result should always be the same. Meditation leads to communion, oneness with God.



Look It Up

1. Read Jesus' teaching about prayer from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:6-8. What instructions does He give us? What does He tell us not to do in prayer?
2. In the next few verses (Matthew 6:9-13), Jesus prays what we call "the Lord's Prayer." What kind of things does Jesus include in His prayer?
3. Look up Psalm 48:9-10 and Psalm 77:11-12. On what do these verses instruct us to meditate?



Did You Know?

Ever wonder why we end prayers by saying, "In Jesus' name I pray?" In John's Gospel, Jesus makes this promise: *"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it"* (John 14:13-14). It's not just random Christian lingo, when we say, "in Jesus' name I pray," we are asking for things in the way Jesus instructed.



Why Should I Care?

Prayer and meditation are the entryway into relationship with God. Think about your best friend. What would happen if you didn't talk to your friend or spend time with him or her? What if you only talked once a week for a few minutes? How close would your relationship be?

As Christians, our goal is to grow in relationship with God. Our relationship cannot grow if we are not talking to God and spending time with Him. The thing is God already knows everything about you. He knows your desires, your concerns, the things that make you excited, and the things that irritate you. But what God wants the most is to hang out with you. He wants to hear your voice. He wants to spend time alone with you. Have you ever had a relationship with someone where you can just sit together and it's not awkward? That's the kind of relationship God wants with you. He loves it when you talk, but He also loves it when you just realize He's there without even saying a word.



Giving It to God

Father, Dad—I'm sorry for not spending time with you and for not communicating with you. Thank you for wanting to listen. It's so cool that you are everywhere and that you hear me whenever I pray. Help me to be aware of your presence. Help me talk to you about everything. Show me what it means to remain in you. God, my greatest desire is to be closer to you. Holy Spirit, guide my prayers and meditations that they may be in line with my Father's will. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.



Take It with You

To start practicing prayer and meditation, you first need

to find a place to meet with God. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus said that personal prayer should be done in secret. Find a quiet place where you won't be distracted. You may also want to designate a certain time of the day when you will pray. Having a specific time and place to pray will help you create a regular habit of withdrawing from the world to be with God.

There are several modern Christian authors that provide models for prayer. Bill Hybels, a pastor in Chicago, suggests the well-balanced, "ACTS" method of prayer. ACTS is an acrostic for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. In this model, you begin with adoration, praising God. Then, you move onto confessing your sins and then thanking God for His provision and forgiveness. Lastly, you practice supplication by making your requests to God.

When it comes to meditation, we should begin by choosing a subject for meditation. Remember, you can choose a passage from Scripture to meditate on, or you can choose to meditate on nature, the events of your life, current events in the news, or music. Once you choose your subject, prepare yourself to spend time with God. A good way to start is to sit quietly and then pray Psalm 19:14, *"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."* Next, begin to focus on your subject of meditation. Concentrate your thoughts, feelings, imagination, and all five senses on your subject. This part will look different for different people. After several minutes of focus, move into a time of application. What did you learn through focusing? What does that mean for you and your relationship with the Lord? After the application time, take time to enjoy communion with God. Just sit in His presence. Lastly, thank God for the experience with a short prayer.

Overall, just make time to talk to and be with God. Keep a teachable attitude, and allow God to change you as you pray.



Dig Deeper

Here are some books that will be helpful if you want to do more studying on this important topic:

- ▶ *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* by Richard Foster (HarperSan Francisco, 1992).

Foster's book provides an extensive guide on twenty-one types of prayer, each of which will refresh your prayer life.

- ▶ *Spiritual Direction & Meditation* by Thomas Merton (The Liturgical Press, 1960).

The second half of this classic book offers further explanation on meditation and advice on how to practice it.