The Privilege and Responsibility of Prayer

Most believers are aware of the importance Scripture places on the exercise of prayer. Most would agree that believers should pray “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and need lengthy seasons of prayer (Matthew 26:36-42), but are unaware of how to implement these principles in daily life. In fact, saints are often unaware of some of the very basic data concerning their privilege and responsibility to prayer.

**My Personal Experience**

Early in my Christian walk I wanted to practice a significant prayer ministry, but I struggled with how to go about it. As a pastor I arose early and used my church membership list to intercede for my people. However, my “quiet time” was more about Bible reading and preparation of messages than about intercession. Worshipping the Lord was hardly on my radar.

Both of my parents became believers after I was saved. In fact, I led my Dad to Christ. Mom was saved about ten years later. Mom became a student of the Word, but my Dad had a limited understanding of Scripture. I never saw my Dad read a book. He once told me he would simply go to sleep when he attempted to read. But he developed a simple yet close walk with the Lord as evidenced by his death. Dad died victoriously. But my Mom, the Bible student, died bitter. Their responses to death had a major impact on my life. I realized I needed to have an intimacy with God like Dad, not just Bible knowledge like Mom. I needed to draw near to God and He would draw near to me (James 4:8).

Then after decades of ministry, I retired. I was diagnosed with cancer as a result of exposure to Agent Orange while serving as a Chaplain in Vietnam. Having served in Birmingham, Alabama at Southeastern Bible College for twenty-three years (eleven as President) and an interim pastor in over thirty churches mostly in the Birmingham area, I have high recognition in the city as a Christian leader. It is essential that I be victorious in death like my Dad and not bitter like my Mom. I need to live closer to God to have victory in the process of dying.

**My Study in the Bible**

As a result of the above mentioned experiences and my own study, I began to give more time to prayer. But, as I sought more Biblical insights concerning prayer, I was rebuked by what I discovered. Acts 6:1-4 reshaped my ministry. The Apostles solicited helpers so they could devote themselves to the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the Word. In my ministry I could spend an entire day in study and sermon preparation, but my prayer time was a struggle. Acts 6:4 does not necessarily imply an equal amount of time spent, but it does imply what most would consider an inordinate amount of time in prayer!

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My own struggle with the concept of extended prayer times centered around the question of what to pray about during those lengthy prayer sessions. How did Joshua pray until the evening (Joshua 7:6) or Samuel pray all night (1 Samuel 15:11), or our Lord pray for hours (Matthew 26:36-46)? The more I studied, however, the more I realized that if the Scripture was taken seriously, then my prayer responsibilities were substantial.

As we have become more health conscious, I have realized the need for a balanced diet. The same is true when praying. We need a balanced menu in our prayer time.
THE BALANCED MENU OF PRAYER

There are at least five different kinds of prayer revealed in 1 Timothy 2:1, along with 1 John 1:9. All of them should be incorporated into our prayer life.

Supplication

The first kind of prayer listed in 1 Timothy 2:1 is supplication. The first six letters “supply” indicate the significance of this word. We are to pray about the supplying of our needs. Saints are very familiar with Philippians 4:19 which teaches “the Lord will supply all of our needs according to His riches.” Also, the context of Philippians 4:19 is one in which Paul is expressing appreciation for his missionary support. An equally important observation is that although this is a promise, the Lord has a requirement regarding the promise. James says, “you have not because you ask not” (James 4:2). We are to pray about our needs.

Adoration

The second kind of prayer listed in 1 Timothy 2:1 is a word translated “prayers.” It is a general term for prayer and carries the idea of worship and reverence. The problem that the believer faces with this kind of prayer is how to enhance one’s ability to worship in prayer. We find it easier to pray about needs, but have a difficulty sustaining worshipful prayer. However, there are ample prayers of worship in Scripture that can empower saints to genuinely worship the Lord. We can be assured that when such passages are utilized as an expression our own heart, they are pleasing to the Lord or He would not have included them in His Word. As a hymn writer helps us express our heart in worship, so the authors of Scripture can help us express adoration in our prayers.

These worship prayers are found throughout the Bible. I regularly use a prayer found in the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:22. It reads, “You are great O Lord God; for there is none like You and there is no God besides You.” Again in 2 Kings 19:15 we read, “You are God, You alone over all the kingdoms of the earth. You made heaven and earth.”

Psalm 95:3-5 says “the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. In whose hands are the depths of the earth. The peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His for He made it and His hands formed the dry land.” I just change the pronouns and address the passage to the Lord as my prayer!

For this article, I counted up the passages I currently have memorized and use in my worship time and discovered there are forty-five passages. Some are short such as those sighted above, but some are lengthy such as Psalm 8 and Isaiah 40:15-30. This practice takes me about an hour depending on how many of the passages I use. In order to avoid rote prayer, I have to be careful to focus on what I am saying and I find it helpful to speak out loud. I also incorporate my own expressions of worship that surface in my thinking as I am praying.

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Intercession

A third kind of prayer mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:1 is intercession, praying for others. This is a technical term for approaching a king. The intercessor went to the king on behalf of others just as we are privileged to talk to the King of Kings on behalf of others. People in our sphere of influence may not be comfortable with our witness for the Lord, but when they face a crisis they turn to believers to intercede on their behalf. This term is used by Paul to describe a ministry of the Spirit (Romans 8:27). The same word is also used in Romans 8:26 regarding the Spirit’s ministry for saints. A prepositional prefix is attached to the verb meaning “on behalf of.” This prefix gives special emphasis to the idea of intercession on behalf of the saints.

The word is also used of Christ’s prayer ministry on our behalf (Romans 8:34).

Samuel makes an interesting comment in 2 Samuel 12:23, “far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.” As a retiree, prayer is now a major ministry for me. My daily practice is to pray for each member of the Talley family, and for pastors and missionaries who share with me their specific requests. Currently, I am praying for nineteen missionary couples and their children in such countries as China, Mali, West Africa, Macedonia, South Africa, Hong Kong, Scotland and Ecuador, to name a few. Daily I pray for fourteen pastors and their families. I am also praying for the salvation of twenty specific individuals in such places as California, Hong Kong, Utah, Washington D.C., Virginia, London, Argentina, and Alabama. Remember, I am retired and prayer is now a major ministry for me, but I pray daily for about one hundred thirty five people by name.

Thanksgiving

The fourth kind of prayer is thanksgiving. Because of our sin nature, we are not thankful people. As young children our parents had to remind us to say “thank you.” Believers continue to have this problem as adults even when it comes to the Lord. When we are not thankful, we are like unsaved mankind described in Romans 1:21 and also like those in the future apostasy (2 Timothy 3:2).

Colossians 1:12 indicates that saints are to be thankful. In Philippians 4:6-7 we are to avoid anxiety by means of prayer (adoration) and supplication with thanksgiving. For example, believers should express appreciation to the Lord because He created us, sustains us, saved us, protects us, directs us, comforts us and sovereignly controls events in our lives for our good (Romans 8:28) and His glory (Ephesians 1:11-12).

Confession

The fifth prayer element is confession (1 John. 1:9). We need to be sure to confess whenever we fail to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16), grieve Him (Ephesians 4:30) or quench Him (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Daniel in Daniel 9 introduces the concept of confessing national sin (Daniel 9:4ff), and requesting mercy (v.18) and a defense of God’s great name (vv.15, 18, 19).

One final comment in this section. The Word makes it very clear that we need to maintain a balanced prayer menu. As a practical suggestion, divide your prayer list with the above five types of prayer in mind.
Additionally, I discovered that along with a balanced menu of prayer, the Scriptures provide us with some important standard operational procedures. The Army calls these SOP’s. If believers are going to have an effective prayer ministry, they need to keep these biblical SOP’s constantly before them.

The Operational Procedures of Prayer
There are at least four standard operational procedures in an effective prayer ministry. Failure to incorporate these SOP’s will negatively impact one’s prayer ministry.

Personal Relationship with God
In John 14:6, our Lord said that there is only one way to God, and that is by means of Christ Himself. He is the way, the truth and the life and no one is able to come to the Father except through Him. This is true in salvation and it is also true in prayer. In John 14:13,15-16 and in John 16:23-24 Christ teaches us to ask in His name. The recipient of our prayers is primarily the Father. Our relationship with the Son provides us with authority to enter into the presence of the Father and address Him as His children. As one studies Paul’s prayers, Paul addresses God as Father (Ephesians 1:17, 3:14; Philippians 1:3, 4:6; Col. 1:3).

When I was serving as the President of Southeastern Bible College, my grandson from California came to visit during the Christmas recess. Most people had to go through my secretary to get to me. My grandson did not see me as president. To him I was grandpa! Because of this relationship he just assumed he could walk into the office and on occasion he did. As believers who are related to Christ, we can come boldly into the presence of the Father (Hebrews 4:16). A personal relationship with the Father through Christ is essential to biblical prayer.

Perseverance in Prayer
The Lord Jesus instructed the Apostles in Matthew 7:7-8 regarding prayer that “everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds and to him who knocks it will be opened.” The Greek verbs in verse 8 are present participles which emphasize habitual action. We are to ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, and knock and keep on knocking. This passage is teaching us to persevere in prayer.

There are two parables which encourage such perseverance. In Luke 11:5-13, the Lord taught the parable of the three loaves. In the middle of the night a man requested three loaves of bread from his neighbor because of the arrival of an unexpected guest. The neighbor initially says no. Jesus said the neighbor may not respond positively because of friendship, yet because of persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs (v.8). Christ makes the point clear: “everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened” (v.10).

The Lord can answer as he wishes, and the saint is to trust Him to do what is best.

In Luke 18:1-8 the parable of Christ concerning the judge and the widow lady implies perseverance. The judge, because of the widow’s continual coming, realizes she will “wear me out” (v.5), so he responded to the widow’s request. Christ instructed that believers are to “hear what the unrighteous judge said” (v.6). He then said, “will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night” (v.7).

In Nineteenth Century England, the Lord led George Müller to begin building homes for his orphans rather than continue renting facilities. Basil Miller in his biography George Müller, the Man of Faith, states that the first building was started July 5, 1847 after Müller and his wife had prayed daily for six hundred and seven days for the Lord’s provisions (Miller, p. 68). That is perseverance in prayer!

As a grandpa, I have been praying for my grandchildren since before each one was even born. I continue to pray for them regarding their salvation, spiritual maturation, choice of spouse and the will of God for their lives. I will continue to pray this way every day.

Purposeful Prayer
In James 1:5 we read “if any of you lacks wisdom, let him as of God.” The context has to do with a right perspective about adversities of life. The point to be made is that a specific need is to be presented to the Lord. So often we fail to tell the Lord what we know we need. We are just too general. Sometimes we do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26), but many times we know exactly how we need to pray. James is implying that we ought to be purposeful when we pray. Be specific! The illustration I frequently use involves a fictitious “Aunt Suzy” who slips on the ice and breaks her ankle. We are not to simply ask that God will “bless” her, we are to pray that God will heal her ankle! Be purposeful!

Again Basil Miller’s biography of George Müller is insightful. He states that Müller prayed definitely and diligently and God answered just as specifically (Miller, p. 69). Müller practiced purposeful prayer. All of God’s people need to do the same!

Positive Prayer
Finally, a fourth operational procedure involves believing God when we pray. James says that saints need to ask in faith without any doubting (v. 6). A believer who does not believe God for answers to prayer ought not to expect to receive anything from the Lord (v. 6). I call this “positive” or “faith believing” prayer. The Lord can answer as he wishes, and the saint is to trust Him to do what is best.

Applying These Principles
A few observations are in order regarding one’s prayer time. First, it involves some discipline. I get up at 5:30 a.m. everyday. I set the alarm, but most of the time my biological clock will sound first. Second, I go to my private prayer closet (Matthew 6:5-6). Third, my time before the Lord involves about two hours, sometimes three hours if I have difficulty focusing or I have some special issues to bring before the Lord. Fourth, I have found that when I pray aloud, I concentrate much better. Fifth, thoughts concerning the activities of the day negatively impact my focus in prayer. I now have a sticky pad in my devotional Bible so that I can make a note and quickly return to the task of praying.

Additionally, I have a prayer list (I call it my cheat sheet) which is written in pencil so I can constantly update as circumstances change. This prayer list is divided into several classifications: 1)
Adoration/Thanksgiving (these words are written in at the top of the sheet so I do not forget); 2) Family; 3) Missionaries and Pastors including family members and requests concerning salvation of particular individuals, and 4) other items.

When using my memorized verses for worshipping, I find from time to time that I forget a verse or a part of the verse. I simply open my devotional Bible where I keep my prayer list, and look up the verse. The Lord knows what I am doing. I then proceed with worship of our wonderful Lord.

**CONCLUSION**

An investigation of Scripture reveals there are five types of prayer which provide a balanced menu of prayer. In addition, the Scripture teaches at least four operational procedures to utilize when we pray. Saints should adjust their prayer ministry accordingly.

Also, as a result of my study of prayers in the Scriptures, I discovered not only the priority of prayer, the parts/elements of prayer and the operational principles of prayer. I have been introduced to a significant number of priority prayer items through a study of prayers embedded in the Word. These priority prayer items need to be included in any ministry of prayer. I also was delighted to realize the Word actually provides steps to use in addressing these priority prayer items. For example, the Word enlightens us regarding how to specifically pray for: 1) missionaries, 2) our children, 3) for the social development or others, 4) for helping others to develop a testimony that brings glory to God, and 5) how to pray for a nation. These insights regarding prayer will be addressed in future articles to be published in the *VOICE*.

I am currently in stage three of my battle with prostate cancer. The Lord allowed me to travel for eighteen months to all the annual field conferences of Biblical Ministries Worldwide, beginning in November, 2008 sharing these insights on prayer with missionaries from forty countries. I am now praying that the Lord will allow me to complete my assignment for the *VOICE* so that I can share what I have discovered with the pastors and people of IFCA International. Please pray with me for God’s sustaining grace.

And may all in IFCA International grow in their practice of prayer.