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# HOW DO I PRAY?

A little book of guidance

JOHN PRITCHARD



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## *Introduction*

It happens to most of us at some time or other. A faint stirring somewhere that there may be more to this life than meets the eye? The thought just flits across our air-space – ‘I wonder . . . is there something else?’ Perhaps something really brilliant or really tragic happens, and we’re not sure what to do with it. Perhaps we meet someone who really impresses us and we discover that person is a Christian. Or we go into a cathedral and something gently tugs at our subconscious. Maybe it even gets as far as a sense of reaching out from inside ourselves for something. But what? That elusive ‘something else’.

Or maybe it even gets as far as a sense of gratitude, a sense of something given. ‘Thank God for that,’ we say, before we realize what we’ve said. Because God for many of us is still very much an open question. So it’s really rather embarrassing to feel gratitude when we’re not sure who to thank. But we fall crazily in love with a person or a place or simply with life itself, and we reach instinctively for someone to thank.

All of these are common human experiences, but we usually don’t notice them and they get buried under an avalanche of new experiences surging along behind. These stirrings, however, may be profoundly significant. This tentative ‘reaching out’ may be like a fragile plant

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pushing its way through concrete, but it may be the first playful sign of a huge spiritual adventure.

One writer talked about ‘signals of transcendence’ which litter our everyday experience. And indeed there are things going on all the time, like longing, laughter, falling in love, playing with a child, natural beauty (‘breathtaking’), moments in music (‘heart-stopping’) – all of which take us outside ourselves for a moment. There’s something else going on here. I wonder . . . ?

So the first move in the spiritual adventure that I’m here calling ‘prayer’ is to recognize these moments when something stirs within us and to savour them. Not to let them be flooded and forgotten, but to notice them and hold them, tenderly, just for a while. And for the time being – that’s enough! Just recognize those moments for what they are, or might be. Signals of something else. A hint of something good. A glimpse in the night. A scent on the wind. An invitation.

# 1

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### *Making space for God*

So there just might be something in it – this ‘something else’. And we might have noticed some germ of an instinct, some stirring inside. A reaching out. An instinct to say thank you, a need to say sorry, or a desire to help someone. But we can all too easily lose the moment unless we make space for it to breathe.

And that’s what we’re terribly short of in our culture – space to let quiet things breathe. The pace of daily life is accelerating and the demands are unremitting. It’s as if we got on the 8.15 from Great Snoring, the slow train that stops at every little village, but instead of chugging its way gently through the countryside it gets faster and faster, accelerating steadily and inexorably, steaming through every station, until the carriage is swaying alarmingly and we’re hanging on to our seats and to our luggage – and still the speed increases! When is it going to come off the tracks?

Or here’s another image. You know when your suitcase is full, and not just full, but absolutely full to bursting?

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You jam another shirt in and kneel on the case to shut it. And now there's a sweater you'd forgotten. You stand on the case to force it shut. No more, you say! And then you realize you've left out your sponge bag. It's just no use. You can't fit anything else in. You need a different strategy. You need to start again.

In a culture where speed and the ability to 'pack more in' is becoming self-defeating, many people are crying out for space. They long to slow down. A group of porters were once rushing through the jungle at a ridiculous pace set by the Europeans who had hired them. Eventually they got to a clearing and sat down. The Europeans tried to get them moving again but the head porter said, 'No, we're not moving. We've come so far and so fast that now we have to wait for our souls to catch up with us.' So does our culture.

Individually, therefore, we need to build some slowing-down time into our lives. Then we can listen to the quiet whispers from another country that we're just becoming aware of. We need to look for the moments of calm in our day and stretch them out. We need to create times for stopping, taking everything out of the case and trying a different way of packing altogether. Slowing down is a vital part of the spiritual journey. Then we can stop panicking about when we're going to come off the rails, and start noticing the fascinating countryside we're travelling through.

Imagine a glass of muddy water. When it's shaken up and disturbed the water becomes murky and unpleasant. Let the glass rest, however, and you see the cloudiness in the water gradually clear as the dirt settles to the bottom.

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Eventually you have clear water and a dark sediment beneath. In some such way, when we slow down, the water of our inner life clears and we're able to see and understand what's really going on inside us. This is the next stage of our spiritual journey.

## *Talking to God*

When we've noticed that there may be 'something else' going on in our lives, and then tried to make some space to stretch out those experiences a bit, there'll come a time when we'll probably want to use words in what we might begin to call 'prayer'.

Words aren't compulsory! It's just that we're speaking animals and we've always entrusted our thoughts and feelings to words in a desire to communicate with each other – and with God.

We live in a society that uses words in vast quantities. We send them everywhere, by letter, fax, e-mail, internet, phone, texts, tweets, blogs, junk mail, and a huge output of newspapers and magazines. We're drowning in words, but rarely is there much judgement or discernment about our use of them. We're simply promiscuous with them.

And yet words are the best tools we've got for communication, so it shouldn't be surprising that our venture into prayer will soon take us into this dangerous arena. We've slowed down in order to give opportunity for those stirrings of thankfulness, wonder or need to see the light of day. We've made space to get in touch with

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what's going on inside us. Now comes the desire to speak to the 'something else' that seems increasingly like a Someone Else.

But what shall we say?

Three things that don't matter:

### 1 Quantity

We don't have to say a lot. We just have to say what we want, or what we feel strongly about. In any case, saying a lot may mean we lose the point. Woody Allen once said, 'I took a speed reading course and read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It's about Russia.' Prayer is about life, all of it, but we don't need to talk about it all at once!

### 2 Quality

We don't have to speak well, in good English, with nicely rounded phrases. Authenticity is what matters. It's a conversation, not an exam.

### 3 Knowledge

We don't need to have a theology degree to speak to God any more than we need a medical degree to speak to a doctor. Prayer is for amateurs, and we remain amateurs all our lives.

Two things that do matter:

### 1 Being natural

In the Bible it's said that Moses talked with God 'as with a friend' (Exodus 33.11). That's the model. We simply talk with him about anything and everything, in the sporadic, or focused, or 'um-er' way we talk to

anyone in the daily round of our lives. When we talk to God there's no need to put on evening dress.

2 Being honest

A schoolboy was very angry about his parents splitting up, and that anger spilled over on to God. He heard a sermon about Jacob arguing and fighting with God through the night, so he went back to his room and burst out, 'God, I hate you.' 'Excellent,' said his chaplain, later. Why? Because he was being honest. The psalms are full of the passionate cries of honest people venting their feelings before God. Honesty is what God deals with best.

*Becoming aware of God's presence*

Prayer is sometimes spoken of as talking with God. But if that's the case, how come we hear so little from God's side? Perhaps we're gaining confidence that we can say things to God, however hesitantly, but the other end of the line seems pretty quiet. And in any case, if people say they hear the voice of God, we tend automatically to wonder about their medical history. So what does 'listening' mean in the context of prayer? And not in a way that requires a PhD in prayer – we're happy to be learning the alphabet here. What does listening to God mean for the beginner or the 'beginner-again'?

Essentially it means being open and attentive to God, who will be wanting to communicate his love to us in many more ways than simply with words. 'Listening' is a bit misleading. Words, or the faculty of hearing, are

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too narrow as categories. God communicates his presence to us through the whole fabric of life, but nearly always shyly, without attempting to overwhelm us and take away our freedom. God is always coming towards us, at every moment, and in everything that happens. Our task is to be more attentive to his coming, to listen between the lines, to catch the silent music.

Prayer, then, is simply being present to the presence of God, which we can do in a multitude of ways in the midst of life as well as when we give him time and priority. Prayer is being with God, in all sorts of ways and at all sorts of times. And when we're there, so is God. He may be there obviously or very quietly. We may be struck between the eyes or quite unaware of his presence. But he will always be there, gracefully active in the deep places of our lives. And we may become aware of this at any time – when we're putting out the washing, queuing in the supermarket, or listening to a colleague in a meeting. Be attentive – listen – and there'll be something deeper to discover. He may be hidden, but he's not hiding.

It was Woody Allen (again!) who said, 'Eighty per cent of life is just turning up.' So is prayer. Most of it is just turning up and letting God be God. If we're aware of him – great. If we're not – fine. He's still at work with us. He's got plenty of time, and he's a wonderful opportunist! Whatever we give him, he's always saying, 'Now what shall we make of this?'

But let's be particular. 'Listening' isn't about hearing voices; it's a much bigger attentiveness to a God who is always coming towards us at every moment. God always

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starts the conversation because he's always reaching out to us.

But how will we notice his presence?

- Sometimes we might be aware of 'deep thoughts' – ideas and convictions which formulate themselves as we pause and pray. Listen to them, because they've at last been able to surface, and God may be in them. If so, they will have their own authenticity. We'll recognize their truth.
- Sometimes that moment of recognition will come through what others say, or what we read or see, or through events themselves, and we'll recognize the force of that insight as being for us. It drives home. It has the ring of truth about it. It may not strike anyone else; it's a personal 'disclosure'. It's God dealing with our heart.
- God often speaks to people through the language of creation. His world is just so stunningly beautiful, in the smallest detail or in the grandest sweep. Grown men are brought to tears by sunset in the Himalayas or left speechless by the incredible colours of the fish in the Gulf of Aqaba. Nature constantly amazes us and invites us to respond.
- Very often God will communicate through his special Word, the Bible. Here is the wisdom of God, actively seeking us out. In the interaction between this Book of Books and the deep places of our hearts God communicates through the electric charge of the Spirit. Sometimes we'll be stopped in our tracks; sometimes we'll be challenged to the core; sometimes we'll be

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made aware of his incredible love. Our task is to listen to our hearts as we read the transcript of God's love.

- Another form of encounter with this God who is constantly coming towards us is through what may be a deep emotional response to music, or poetry, or a book or film, or someone relating an incident in their lives. From deep within comes a profound set of unexpected emotions with the divine signature discreetly upon them.

## *Relating to God*

Prayer is about exploring a relationship with God, not about perfecting an esoteric technique. It may help, therefore, to use an image of prayer like another deep relationship – that between husband and wife. If a marriage is to be healthy the relationship needs to exist at four levels:

- 1 *Just getting on with it.* Much of marriage is lived naturally and unselfconsciously. We don't go on about it; we just live with that relationship as a backdrop. Similarly much of our relationship with God involves simply getting on with the pleasures and problems of living, but doing that against the background of God's good presence. And all of us can grin at God occasionally!
- 2 *Chatting.* An essential part of marriage is the daily sharing of a hundred minor conversations about nothing much at all. 'Do remember that dental appointment, won't you?' 'Could you get to the bank for me today?' 'I thought you were going to change that Damien

Hirst poster in the kitchen?’ Similarly, much of our day-to-day communication with God will be by chatting – what we call ‘arrow prayers’, i.e. quick-contact, instant-access prayers.

- 3 *Talking.* Any marriage needs proper conversation that gets down to things that matter. There may not be a lot of time in any one day, but thoughts, feelings, deeper things, need to come out and be shared. So with God. We need at some time to have the space and the focus of simply being with God, to deepen the relationship. This is where the going gets tough!
- 4 *Intimacy.* Marriage partners need to remain ‘in touch’ with each other – literally. They need to go beyond words to actions and the world of the senses. This is where touch, love and intimate silence have their place. In prayer too there is a time when words fall away and silence, meditation and the simple enjoyment of God take over.

Use the checklist above on levels of relationship and apply it to your relationship with God. Do you want to adjust your own way of praying in any way yet? Or will you just keep this checklist in mind for future use?

### *Finding a special time for prayer*

We’ve looked at ‘just getting on with it’ prayer and ‘chatting’ prayer in the last section. What we come to look at now is ‘talking’ prayer, what to do in the time we’ve set aside especially to focus on our relationship with God.

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Without some such dedicated time that relationship is likely to suffer as much as a human relationship that isn't valued properly or given enough time and attention. It may not be possible to find that time every day, but it has to be found on some days or we'll notice the difference. The concert pianist Artur Rubinstein once said: 'If I don't practise for a day, I notice the difference; if I don't practise for two days, my family notices the difference; if I don't practise for three days, the public notices the difference.'

*When?* The most important thing here is regularity. It doesn't matter when the time is, as long as it's regular. Depending on our life-situation, it could be early in the morning (there are such people, I'm told), in the commuter train, after getting the children off to school, during a lunch break in a park or a city church, after supper if we're not going out, or maybe last thing at night. For a student it could be when you first get to your desk. For other people it could be when walking the dog, or cooking, or even changing the baby's nappy. (Be gentle with yourself if you have a young family – it's the most difficult time of all to sustain a life of prayer.) We have to be flexible in our timing but this period of prayer needs to become a regular part of our life rather than an extra we might easily forget.

*Where?* What we need here is somewhere that becomes associated with prayer, so that simply to go to that place takes us halfway into the presence of God already. The particular place may be a chair by the window or in the kitchen; it may be a corner of a room, set up to be a special 'chapel'; it may even be a seat on the train or

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in the car, or a particular part of a walk. Places are more significant than many people think. We all of us have special places – be they football grounds, the setting of a first romance, the scene of a glorious holiday. And sacred places, too, matter very much – places where heaven has opened a crack, where an angel's wing has brushed our face, or where we've experienced mystery. There are no rules about where our special place should be, at home, in a church or in a field. But when you get there – stay. The philosopher Pascal said: 'Most of the troubles of man come from him not being able to stay alone in his own room.' In other words, there is serious business to be done here – don't run away.

*With what things?* If we are going to have our own space at home then a number of questions arise about what we'll need with us. Again, this is very much up to personal choice. Many of us value having a cross at the centre of our vision, or an icon. Candles speak a common language and lighting a candle marks out the time we're giving to this special purpose of prayer. Something of beauty may help – flowers are common. We may also have a small CD player or iPod to play appropriate music as we settle in. A simple prayer stool where you tuck your legs under the cross-piece is comfortable and relaxed. And of course we need the Bible with us, and maybe a few other devotional books to help our prayer and reflection. This is a place to be at home in, so the choices we make are very personal. In the centre of my own sacred space, under the cross, is a pair of pottery hands I got on the Greek island of Patmos. These open hands are a constant symbol of my need to open myself

## *Getting started*

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