

Dear Friends,

In this Methodist Year of Prayer, I wonder if you ever ask yourself, “Why do we pray?”. I know one 15-year-old who has been praying for snow. Have her prayers been answered, and if so what about the people who have been praying for clear roads? What is the purpose of prayer? Is it to get what we want from the Almighty or is it to submit to what the Almighty wants?

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, ‘The function of prayer is to change the nature of the one who prays’. That deserves personal reflection. I wonder to what extent we approach prayer wanting God to change our very nature. This implies a deep work of grace in the core of our being. It implies a personal experience that may not be visible to others, but which bears fruit in ways that other people can discern. ‘It’s through our authentic engagement with Him that He forms us. It’s through the intimacy of prayer that we become like Him. So, we should seek Him in His Word and then simply talk to Him.’ (Carrie Marrs, *A Prayer for Every Occasion*, publ. Zondervan).

How do we know how to pray? As Methodists our hymn books are our prayer books. Perhaps like me you have treasured old hymn books into which you occasionally dip. I have my old Sunday School hymn book, an old Methodist Hymn Book, a copy of *Sacred Songs and Solos* (Sankey), and even a Billy Graham Song Book from his 1967 London Crusade as well as many more. When words fail, then the inspired words of other Christians are a real boon. Of course, I also have many books in which are compiled the prayers of others through the ages. I am not as accomplished as some people at memorising, but the prayer of Ignatius Loyola, recited so often at my secondary school, frequently comes to mind: ‘Teach me dear Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest ...’

The Bible is a treasure house of prayer. In it we find teaching on prayer and many examples of prayer. We can paraphrase for ourselves part of a psalm, or a prayer of St Paul or another Biblical Saint. Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6) is a good example. As we read in the Bible about the attributes and gifts of God, we gain inspiration for praise and thanksgiving. As we read our newspapers, we see countless topics for intercession. We can borrow the words of others. We can borrow the ideas of others and use them as a signpost for our own prayers. We can also compose our own, unique

prayers, either expressing them in an extempore, off the cuff prayer spoken from the heart or by writing down a prayer in our own carefully chosen words.

It has been said that most Christians have their struggles, but the key issue is whether we are remaining close to God throughout the challenging times. Spiritual struggles are not necessarily a sign of weakness. Jacob wrestled with God, Jesus was tempted in the Wilderness and St Paul had his thorn in the flesh. Prayer is the process by which we retain and build upon our relationship with God. In the difficult times we learn to depend upon God's grace. As you think of the prayers of great Christians you may be struck by their vulnerability but also their courage, their self-awareness, and their sense of God's powerful presence. These are attributes which we do well to emulate. St Augustine of Hippo is sometimes quoted as saying, 'True, whole prayer is nothing but love'. Wordless prayer which is the expression of our love to God is also prayer.

A great classic book on prayer is 'Practising the Presence of God' by Brother Lawrence. Arguably the awareness of God's presence is a form of prayer. Brother Lawrence practiced God's presence whilst doing mundane chores and he taught the brothers of his community to do the same.

Perhaps prayer is epitomised by George Herbert's hymn, King of Glory King of Peace, written in 1633. This reminds us that prayer is about praising God and is for every day.

*Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee;
in my heart, though not in heaven, I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort to enrol thee:
e'en eternity's too short to extol thee.*

God bless you,

Keith

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