

Getting closer to God through prayer

In any relationship the best way for that relationship to grow closer and for folk to know each other better is by talking to each other. Our relationship with God is no different. If we want to know God better - if we want that closeness to God - we need to talk to Him - to pray. If we're honest, we never stop learning about talking to God. So how do we get more from prayer?

Prayer is not easy..... but it's important. God's Word encourages us to pray. God's Word is full of advice on prayer - take Philippians 4:6 "in every situation." or 1 Thessalonians 5:17 "continually,". God's Word teaches us that prayer is "powerful and effective" James 5:16. Jesus taught about prayer in parables and by His example. Take Luke 18:1-15 or Matthew 6:5-8. Prayer is important and we have lots of encouragement to pray - yet most if not all of us find it hard

Our own experience shows us how important prayer is in getting to know God better and that there are traps. Some fall into the trap of treating prayer as One-Sided - not really engaging with God. Others fall into the trap of Ritual - believing it's something you only really do in church or on a Sunday. Yet others treat prayer as an Emergency Helpline - believing you pray when desperate in dire situations. Whilst yet others fall into the trap of Familiarity - prayer losing its power because we say the same things so often

There are a few key basic truths about prayer and a prayer life. #1 There is no "one and only" way to pray, #2 Prayer is as diverse as the people who pray, #3 God seeks sincerity - your heart - NOT perfection - perhaps that's the most important one to remember. We also have a couple of basic questions to ask ourselves. Have we got the best Attitude to prayer? and Have we got the best Focus in our prayer life?

So what helps us then to get more from prayer? What have others found challenging but ultimately helpful? All have found God is more interested in our attitude than our words. That's not a new discovery. Way back in the Psalms writers nailed it down "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." Psalms 51:17 NIVUK

Looking at Our Attitude? - What are our Expectations of God? Psalm 121:5 in the Message paraphrase gets it about right for me "God's your Guardian, right at your side to protect you." Different words are used for Guardian as translators seek the best fit but they all mean the same. Doesn't really matter if a Thesaurus says you can use champion, protector, keeper, sentinel, shepherd, preserver - the list goes on but all mean the same.

We need to overcome 4 real dangers in prayer. Insisting God answers prayer only in the way we want - with the DANGER that we actually MISS His answer! Being impatient if God says "wait" or "not yet" - with the DANGER that God may be trying to teach us we've got more to learn. Assuming "No" means God doesn't answer all prayer - with the DANGER that God may be saying "this thing is not right for you". Refusing to accept "No" as an answer and go off in a strop - with the DANGER of believing we know better than God! The key thing to remember is that God is our Guardian and will always act in our best interests - even if we disagree with Him

How do we learn to Submit to God being GOD!!? Psalm 47:2 sort of sums it up simply "For the Lord Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth." We need to develop humility (not at all easy for most people). We have to remember our relationship with God

is NOT one of equals - He alone is GOD!! He may be our Father, He may be our friend but at the end of the day He is an awesome God. We have to stop limiting God to our understanding. If we could understand and explain everything about God He wouldn't be very awesome. If we're honest experience shows God does actually know what's best for us. Just bringing an issue or concern to God - without our solution - is often enough. We need to follow Jesus' example in Gethsemane - submission is not always easy. No matter how hard it was for Jesus, no matter how much He wrestled with God, He submitted to God's will "..... Yet not what I will, but what You will." Mark 14:36 NIVUK

How do we Intentionally Listen to God? We usually talk to God but God wants us to listen to him as well - a proper conversation. Don't be afraid of intentional silence - it lets God get a word in. Sometimes words aren't needed just enjoy the presence of God - let God give you a hug. Remember Psalm 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God"

And what about our Focus? How can we broaden our prayers? So often we can get in a rut - always doing what we've always done. Going through the same prayer or prayers like a mantra or by rote. Going through the same process - like a ritual that becomes stilted. The danger is we can lose that closeness to God - that intimacy and run the risk of not involving Him in the whole of our life. There are 650 prayers in God's Word alone (depending how you count the 150 Psalms) plus our own reactions as we study God's Word regularly - we have to try and learn from them and not be passive. Prayer doesn't have to be long, or fluent, or poetic, or fully thought through. Prayers aren't essays - they are conversations seeking to involve God in our life. Often the best prayer is short, ad hoc, spontaneous, reaction

How about Arrow Prayers - Pray before you start something important - lift it to God - seek His presence. Like Nehemiah in the Old Testament seeking God before he gave important answers. or Emotional Prayer - Don't try and hide what you're feeling. God gave us emotions - God understands emotion. He knows how we feel so trying to pretend is pointless. Sharing our emotions with God can really help us. God's shoulders are big enough to take all our emotions - even our anger. Then there are Gratitude Prayers - Just say and mean "Thank you". Something we can often overlook. Just think how much we appreciate someone saying thank you to us. Why should God be any different? And what about Lamenting Prayers - Sharing with God our pain, our "why?" or "why me?" questions. Many of the Psalms are laments - expressing, pouring out, the sorrow being felt. God knows we're not always on top of things - it's ok to share misery with God. He knows we are in the real world. It's ok to share with God our depths as well as our heights

Try searching Prayer Commentaries - learn from others. Prayer is so important to knowing God better that we need to be open to learning from others. Perhaps even sharing with others what we have found most helpful. You don't have to agree with them but there are thousands if not hundreds of thousands of books and websites explaining how to pray or topics of prayer. Perhaps helping you to understand a particular prayer - what it was trying to achieve and how and why God responded in the way He did

How aware are we of the needs of others? It's only natural to focus on what happens to us but that can make prayer only "I" centred. We need to be more generally aware and knowledgeable about other people and their needs. Use Prayer diaries, news letters and bulletins from Christian Organisations or even the Media - newspapers, news websites, tv. Then there's the everyday - sharing whatever gets our attention, and of course, creation - the physical world around us - it's beauty and its power

What about adding structure to our prayers. Do Acronyms help? Acronyms split peoples views - some find them incredibly helpful while others find them restrictive. A few to think about JOY - Jesus Others Yourself, ACTS - Adoration Confession Thanksgiving Supplication, PRAY - Praise Repent Ask Yield or Pause Reflect Ask Yield. When asked, Jesus Himself gave us a structure - a model. His prayer - the Lord's Prayer. Expanding and developing the lines of the Lord's Prayer gives an endless source of knowing God better

Time is precious - how much of it do we give to God? Focus? Intentionally make time to be with God - recognise you are in His presence. Finding a quiet space where you can focus - having the tv on or the middle of Sheffield station are not the best. Doesn't mean you can't pray in those places but it's easier in the quiet. Making time with God a priority - not just a tag on

So we've got the Building Blocks for getting to know God better through Prayer. First things first though we need to open our minds to what God might be challenging each of us to think about

- What are my Expectations of God?
- Do I need to Submit more to God?
- Am I intentionally Listening for, and to, God?
- Do I need to Broaden the way I pray?
- How Aware am I of the needs of others?
- Would more Structure help me?
- Do I need to reflect on the Time I give God?

As we work up and through the blocks we become more and more soaked in the presence of the Holy Spirit we just need to make them work for us