

PRAYER
BASICS
FOR EVERYONE

Terry Glaspey



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Prayer Basics for Everyone

Excerpted from *25 Keys to Life-Changing Prayer*

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-8968-8 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-7369-8969-5 (eBook)

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Printed in the United States of America

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 / BP / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PRAYER AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

When I was a child, I would kneel down by my bed every evening, fold my hands together, and “say my prayers.” I don’t know that I ever expected them to be answered very specifically, but I understood it as part of my duty. I was a Christian, and praying was something Christians did. God seemed pretty distant to me at that time, but I wanted to keep Him happy by performing the nightly ritual of reciting “Now I lay me down to sleep,” and then, when I got older, the Lord’s Prayer.

During my junior high years, I began to read the Bible for myself and listen to the stories and testimonies of those who seemed to know God more intimately than I did. I began to understand that God was not a far-off, unapproachable deity, but Someone who cared about me, the struggles of my life, and my hopes and dreams. I learned that God was not only powerful but personal. Not an abstract power to be placated by my adherence to little rituals—such as “saying my prayers”—but Someone who loved me and I could lean upon. This awareness began to change the way I thought about prayer. Prayer was no longer a ritual to be performed; it was true communication. I could actually talk with God, and He would listen. And often, in my heart of hearts, I could sense the whisper of an answer.

Understanding that God wants to commune with us and to communicate with us—to be present in our lives (“hang with us,” if you will) and to have an ongoing conversation—is the foundation upon which prayer is based.



Some people treat prayer like a formality, and though God hears those prayers, they are unlikely to lead to deeper intimacy with Him. Others see prayer more as a magic formula they can use to solve all their problems, a secret recipe for getting God’s help to fulfill their needs and desires. They call on God as though He is their servant and they can—if they use the right words—get Him to serve their bidding. It’s as though He were a vending machine ready to dispense whatever they desire. That is certainly not what prayer is designed to be.

Some books on prayer would lead us to believe it is all about saying just the right words—as though God acts on our behalf only when we punch in the correct password. As Groucho Marx used to say on his game show: “Say the magic word, the duck comes down, and you win a hundred dollars.”

Nor is prayer a magic wand that we can wave over every situation and expect the desired results. Instead, prayer is all about relationship with God. It is the natural response that comes from experiencing intimacy with Him.

Prayer is the beating heart of the spiritual life. It is impossible to imagine spiritual growth without the practice of prayer. Prayer is what transforms religion into relationship. With prayer our faith no longer consists of

lofty thoughts and philosophies and doctrines *about* God, but becomes the basis for a friendship *with* God. In prayer we experience the depth of that friendship, whether through spending quiet moments with Him or by opening our heart and communicating the deepest things we think and feel.



The goal of our communion with God in prayer is to become aware of His presence, a presence that is always with us. It means keeping company with Him, moment by moment as we go through our days, practicing the awareness of His reality in our lives. As we will explore in a later chapter, it is the art of “practicing the presence of God.”

Our communication with God should be more like talking things over with a dear friend than performing a ritual or fulfilling a duty. Prayer is not a philosophical monologue or some kind of self-talk by which we work out our problems. Nor is it a religious exercise we perform in order to gain points or favor with God. It is not an address to an unknowable and impersonal Creator-Being but communication with a loving heavenly Father. That is why the model prayer Jesus gave His disciples, when they asked Him how to pray, begins: “Our Father.”



We enter into this intimate relationship with God by accepting what Jesus has done on our behalf. Through our relationship with Him we can draw close to the heavenly Father. In Jesus Christ we “may approach God with freedom and confidence” (Ephesians 3:12). The message of the

Christian gospel is that God reached down to the human race in the person of Jesus Christ, who came to live and die as one of us, to experience the fullness of our human experiences, and to provide a new destiny for humanity. In the Old Testament Scriptures, a priest would represent the people before God. But now Jesus has become our representative, a high priest whose actions make it possible for us to have direct access to God. As Hebrews 4:14-16 reminds us:

Since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

But our help doesn't end there. For God has given us His Holy Spirit, resident within us, to lead and guide us into the life that God has for us. One of the powerful ways He helps us is through prayer. When we wonder what we should pray about, we are promised the help of the Holy Spirit:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through

wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (Romans 8:26).

Our intimacy with God is Trinitarian in nature—the Father who loves us, the Son who intercedes for us, and the Holy Spirit who leads and guides us. All this is based upon the intimacy of our relationship with God. He has come near to us, and is still near to us—as near as the breath we draw to form a prayer on our lips.



In our prayers we expose our true selves to God. Vulnerability is a hard thing for most of us, but it is safe to be vulnerable with Him. We can share everything that is on our hearts: fears, worries, guilt, aspirations, desires, and needs. And God bestows upon us the dignity of listening to everything we say—no matter how foolish, self-centered, or self-indulgent it might be. He hears us, and He cares. And He not only hears, but He speaks. Into the quietness of our hearts He speaks words of hope and peace and comfort to keep us going, or words of challenge and correction to set us on a better path.

The purpose of the communication we experience in prayer is like that in any other relationship—not to extract something from the other person but to get to know them and to allow them to get to know us. We cannot truly call someone our friend until we have been willing to be vulnerable and to reveal our deepest and

truest self to them, with all its faults and foibles. Similarly, true prayer is the great act of vulnerability. If prayer is only a religious nicety, then it will contribute little to our spiritual growth. But if it is the way we know and are known, then it is the key to the spiritual life and holds the promise of changing our lives.