



From Coping to Cure

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 15: I PRAYED, BUT I STILL DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT

THOUGHT STARTER:

Why do you feel good after praying sometimes, and other times you are anxious?

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7, NKJV

I was asked to speak to a group gathered for "a day of prayer." This was a good assignment because like most speakers, I usually learned more in preparation for the presentation than the audience did in listening to the message. I spent three days thumbing through my Bible, reflecting and meditating on the subject of prayer.

Looking back, I did a lot of praying while Eva was struggling with cancer and also when my second wife, Marcey, died suddenly. I did a lot of praying before Jo and I married. There have been other crises in my life when I pleaded with God to help me solve a problem. But upon reflection, I have found that it is very easy to drift away from watching God work.

A day of prayer, or, more precisely, an annual day of prayer, served me well. It gave me a chance to pause, to let the world go by for a day, and to contemplate the privilege of talking things over with the Creator of the universe.

The verse at the head of this chapter promises the peace that passes understanding will guard our hearts and minds as a by-product of prayer: a peace that is a quiet, still, calm, serene state of heart and mind. Everyone seeks this, but not everyone wants to meet the conditions. Prayer and supplication imply the acceptance of the truth that you must submissively and earnestly relinquish control over the events of your life to Someone else.

This proposition is a bit much for "modern" self-sufficient people who may have

achieved an education, a position, wealth, power, or authority, without giving God a thought. Why should they turn control of their lives over to anyone, even God?

THE NEED FOR PRAYER

The answer is that sooner or later, a peaceful heart and mind will elude you. Personal attainment, competence, and intelligence are heady stuff, but not the keys to finding the peace of God. Truly self-sufficient people find this hard to believe.

I remember sitting across the desk from a businessman who had all the benefits of success: a large, beautifully decorated home located on spacious, well-tended grounds, a summer home, a farm, the finest food, clothing, cars, and the privilege of frequent travel to other countries. He achieved it on his own, yet now he was telling me how and why he needed the Lord.

He and his wife had been invited to attend an executive seminar a year earlier by several men whom he respected. On the way to the seminar, they rode in silence the whole three hours, nursing mutual hostility toward each other, in luxurious, air-conditioned comfort. They were utterly miserable; this was the third straight day they had not spoken to each other.

They sat in the audience and listened to other businessmen and their wives give their testimonies—that they had achieved everything on their own but peace and contentment. Only when they turned control of their lives over to God were they able to experience the peace that passes understanding.

Separately at the conference, both he and his wife prayed and turned control of their lives over to the Lord. This simple step added the missing link for them: access to the peace of God that passes understanding.

A statement once caught my attention. I wrote it down but failed to record the source: "It would seem that a good head, excellent vision, a strong heart, a strong body, an inexhaustible purse—you'd have it made."

Not so when it comes to finding peace of heart and mind. St. Augustine once said to God: "You made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in You."

Even Jesus, God's own Son, needed to turn His life over to God. When He was about to be crucified, He made a request to God:

"Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." (Luke 22:42, NKJV)

The answer was "no." Finishing the task was necessary. It seems that everyone takes his turn in enduring something he would rather not face.

THE METHOD OF PRAYER

Jesus cautioned His disciples about just giving the appearance of praying to God:

**"When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward."
(Matthew 6:5, NKJV)**

I am reminded of some lines in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

My words fly up
My thoughts remain below
Words without thoughts
Never to heaven go.¹

I am ashamed to say it, but as I look back, I can recall instances when, as a part of an audience, I was asked to come to the platform to pray without any warning or preparation. On the way to the platform, I would pull together some random thoughts. I'd ask the audience to bow their heads to pray with me. Most of them would dutifully do so, and I'd speak some words. When finished, I could hardly remember what I had said. I doubt whether the audience did either. I'm not sure my words got beyond the ceiling.

It's a simple matter to say, "Let us pray." It is equally simple to close our eyes and bow our heads. We can join a group for "a day of prayer." All this can be done without praying. Jesus once chided the scribes and Pharisees:

"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me." (Matthew 15:8, NKJV)

Praying is making our requests known to God. The decision regarding our requests is His. The evidence that you have really gotten through to God is that: "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Then, you "watch God work."

When Eva was struggling with cancer, we both requested that she be healed. We both recognized that the decision was out of our hands. Close friends urged us to exercise faith. They said that the evidence of adequate faith was her healing.

Neither Eva nor I could accept that idea. To us, the evidence of faith was peace that passes understanding, guarding our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ. To us, it seemed presumptuous to tell God what to do. We make the request; God makes the decision. We needed to line up our requests with the will of the Creator.

A week before Eva died, one of our friends, a very sincere Christian, came by and said that as she was praying for Eva, the Lord clearly revealed to her that Eva could choose

to live or die. If she chose life, she would need to endure some pain, but she could live.

A letter arrived at the same time from a precious friend, telling us that in prayer the Lord gave this person assurance that God would honor her prayer of faith and heal Eva.

What were we to do with these developments? Eva was getting weaker and weaker. Our response was to turn to the Bible:

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7, NKJV)

"If you ask anything in My name, I will do it. If you love Me, keep My commandments. (John 14:14-15, NKJV)

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16, NKJV)

Building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit... (Jude 20, NKJV)

The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers. (1 Peter 3:12, NKJV)

The Bible tells us that effective praying implies familiarity with the commandments, obedience, and fervent, righteous walking in the Spirit by faith. That is difficult to measure up to. Eva and I decided that as best we could tell, we qualified to approach the Lord once more. We could not honestly say any more than what we had already said. Our prayer was that we agreed with our friends that Eva could live, but we wanted God's will.

Eva died.

During the time Eva struggled with cancer, another crisis was developing. I was involved in a real estate investment with a group of Christians. We united in prayer for the success of this venture. Without getting into the details, suffice it to say that the project was not doing well. The project went belly up and with it a great deal of my money.

THE EVIDENCE OF PRAYER IN OUR LIVES

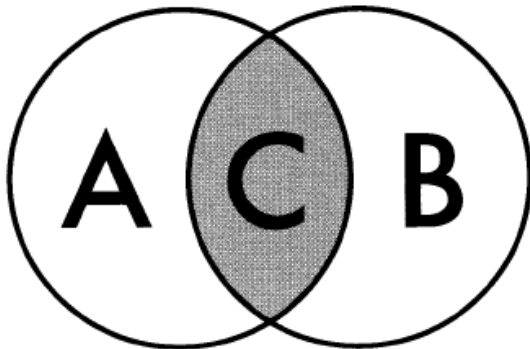
What can you say? The conclusion I came to is contained in a Bible verse:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9, NKJV)

There were many, many people who were united in requesting that Eva should live. There were many people praying for the success of that business venture.

One must conclude that none of us were thinking God's thoughts, nor did our wishes fit with His ways. This requires all of us to search our hearts daily to be sure we qualify to speak in Jesus' name.

In *Chapel News*², Knute Larson wrote on prayer, using a good visual aid that helps explain our interaction with God in the area of prayer:



Two circles explain how prayer works in a simple way.

"If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." (John 14:14, NKJV)

Area A is prayers that are not answered, possibly because we ask selfishly.

And even when you do ask you don't get it because your whole aim is wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. (James 4:3, LB, emphasis added)

Area B is blessings or things God would do for us if we just asked. The Bible tells us why we don't have them:

The reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. (James 4:2, LB)

Intersection C shows answered prayers in line with God's will.

I can recall some glib prayers that I have prayed, such as asking God to help me keep my priorities in order or to help me place my family and the things of this world in proper perspective. I've asked God to use my life and all that I have for His glory. If I expected any answers, I didn't expect the ones I received. But death and financial loss did get my attention. And my experience with prayer over the years has grown to recognize peace, the peace only God gives.

Lesson: The evidence that your prayer is acceptable to God is that you experience the peace of God in your heart.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
- Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
- What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?

1. Why do we sometimes not feel good after praying?
2. How do you think we look to God when we gripe, complain, and resent His choices for us?
3. How does it feel to make our requests known to God and then watch Him work?
4. Give some illustrations of prayer requests and the answers to those prayers.
5. Compare Matthew 15:8 with Shakespeare's lines in *Hamlet*.
6. Discuss Larson's three circles.

¹ Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*. Act 3, scene 3, line 97-99.

² *Chapel News*, A newspaper by Knute Larsen, The Chapel, 135 Fir Hill, Akron, OH 44304.

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