

Prayer

The Practice of Spiritual Breathing

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Inhale - Study One

PARENTS remember a child running to them breathless and upset. "Mummy, Daddy, Mummy, Daddy, I'm frightened. It's bad." The first thing the parent does is to hug the child and say: "Hush now. It's all right. Mummy and Daddy are here. Stop crying. Breathe in a minute. It's O.K." Safe in your arms, the child breathes in, composes, relaxes and is able to tell you the story.

It is the same with prayer. Many of us burst into the presence of our heavenly Father at one hundred miles an hour, breathless, panicked and wanting to pour out a list of needs. Prayer does not start with asking, but with awe and awareness of God. Prayer does not start with wanting, but with waiting and wondering. Prayer does not start with us, but with God. You cannot breathe out, until you have first breathed in. Spiritual breathing starts with breathing in God's presence. So in this series of sermons on praying, I want to emphasize the significance on firstly appreciating God.

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT PRAYERS.

In the Book of Psalms, many written by David, are many Jewish prayers. Special prayers celebrated the beginning and end of the day. The end of the week was heralded by Sabbath services in the home, synagogue and temple. When each year began, at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur there were special prayers. The great festivals such as Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles were celebrated with prayer. Those prayers were in the context of worshipping God.

Foundational for Jewish prayer were the daily prayers in the home, grace after meals and the frequent spontaneous prayers of the individual. Jewish prayers were not pleas for material possessions or rewards, or magical manipulations of a deity who could be controlled by special deeds or words. The author of Daniel has Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego confess that even if God would not deliver them, He was still their God. Dan 3:16-18. Jews lived out the conviction that God does hear and answer prayers: "Hear, O Lord our God, the voice of our prayers, for you are a gracious and compassionate God. Blessed are you, O Lord, who hears prayer." 15/18 Benedictions David stated: "I love the Lord for He hears my voice, my pleas; for He inclines His ear to me whenever I call." Psalm 116:1

2. THE NEW TESTAMENT PRAYERS.

Prayer was a central group activity of the earliest Palestinian Christian community as described in Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:23-31; 6:4, and it is natural to suppose that these prayers were derived from those used in daily private and synagogue prayer in early Judaism. Many prayers have been preserved in early Christian literature. In the New Testament, prayers of petition and intercession occur frequently. The Jewish "thanksgiving" pattern of prayer, which characteristically began with the phrase "I/we thank you," is frequently found in the NT and early Christian literature. Luke 2:38; Heb 13:15; Rev 11:17-18. This type of prayer is also frequently used in Paul to introduce petitions and intercessions. Rom 1:8; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:16-18.

3. THE PRAYERS OF JESUS.

Jesus devoted Himself to prayer. We read: "very early in the morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of the town to a lonely place where He prayed" Mark 1:35. He was at prayer frequently on such occasions as:

- when He came up out of the baptismal waters;
- while He faced temptation in the wilderness;
- before He chose the twelve to train as disciples;
- after the sending of the seventy believers in mission;
- whenever He touched someone to heal them;
- at the time of His transfiguration;
- as He was approaching His passion in Jerusalem;
- while He introduced the last Supper to His disciples;
- when He was in Gethsemane preparing for betrayal and death;
- while He was being nailed to the Cross in excruciating pain;
- as He died His last words were in prayer to His Father;
- after His resurrection for those who believed in Him.

At every point of His life, Jesus prayed. One of the few memories of Jesus found outside the Gospels says: "In His life on earth, Jesus made His prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God who could save Him from death. Because He was devoted and humble, God heard Him. But even though He was God's Son, He learnt through His sufferings to be obedient." Heb. 5:7 The Lord's Prayer was certainly the most widely used of all early Christian prayers. Matt 6:9-13 The great prayer of Jesus John 17 elaborates the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer exemplified major features of Jewish private prayer such as brevity and addressing God personally, but Jesus added another, "our Father".

The Lord's Prayer soon was the public Christian prayer. Early Christian writers said it was prayed three times daily. It was part of church services in the mid-1st century A.D.. By the mid-4th century it was used before every Lord's Supper. Another brief Aramaic prayer maranatha translated "come Lord Jesus!" Rev 22:20, was expectation of the imminent return of Jesus. We will study many passages in subsequent weeks in detail. But from this brief overview, the secret of a strong spiritual life begins with praying, and praying begins with learning to firstly breathe in, in awareness of God in awe and wonder. When we stop our rushing and be still, think of God instead of ourselves, we can take in of His resources and strength. The Scriptures say: "Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

1. Spiritual breathing begins with inhaling, bringing within ourselves, the awareness of God. Isaiah reminded his people that if they were only fully aware of God, His nature, presence and power, then everything they did would be different. Isa 40:28-41:1 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. "Be silent before me." A true awareness of God results in silent awe.

When you become aware of God, what is in the forefront of your mind, is no longer the crisis or urgent matter that was propelling you into God's presence. Instead, your mind is now focused on God, and His grace and glory. You start to think of God's will, His plans and His passion for the world. You have already become a different person. As a result you go forward no longer relying upon your own strength and power, but you go in the strength of God.

Once visiting our Gateway Children's Home where our child carers are brought some of the most troubled, disturbed, and violent children in Sydney, I wondered at how our staff continued to cope with all the aggravation and stress. Then I noticed what one of our staff, Rosalie, had written and pinned above her desk. I copied down her comments that placed little credit upon their high qualifications but much upon God's:

"We the unwilling, led by the unqualified
Have been doing the unbelievable
For so long and with so little,

That we now attempt the impossible
With nothing but prayer.”

The awareness of God enabled them.

2. Spiritual breathing begins with inhaling, bringing within ourselves, the wonder of God. We have to acknowledge our sense of awe and wonder at being in the presence of God. Too many of us want to be too “matey” with God. We rush into His presence as if we have every right, full of ourselves and our needs, with a flippant “G’day God”.

We have no sense of awe and wonder. When the Apostle John was in exile on the Island of Patmos, he came into the presence of God. Note his response: Rev 1: 12-18 “I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” O the wonder of God, that we should come before Him!

You can sing with Charles Wesley,
“Finish then, Thy new creation,
Pure and spotless may we be;
Let us see our whole salvation
Perfectly secured by Thee:
Changed from glory into glory.
Till in heaven we take our place;
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.”

When we are lost in wonder, love and praise, then we can start to pray!

Prayer does not start with asking, but with awe and awareness of God. Prayer does not start with wanting, but with waiting and wondering. Prayer does not start with us, but with God. You cannot breathe out, until you have first breathed in. Spiritual breathing starts with breathing in God’s presence. We are in the right environment to pray when we are aware of God and wonder at His grace.

When King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of God. He became aware of God’s wonder. He saw heavenly creatures. The word means “burning ones”; yet they hid their faces from the greater brightness and the glory of the Lord. They were singing: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.” Isaiah became conscious only of his own sin and his need to get right with God. He cried: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” But one of the Heavenly creatures said: “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

To see God, Isaiah needed to be still and think in awe and wonder. To serve God, Isaiah needed to be a clean instrument. It is the God of burning holiness Himself who provides this cleansing. Prayer starts in stillness, with a sense of God’s awe and majesty, and of our being cleansed by God. When we accept Jesus as Lord we are lost in awe and wonder, and are cleansed of our sin. Now we are ready to see God, and to serve Him. This is the beginning of all true prayer.

Hold - Study Two

The first thing we learned about spiritual breathing was that before we could rush into God's presence with all our needs and requests, we had to breathe in God's presence, and be aware of Him and wonder at His being. All prayer starts with our awareness of God rather than of our need. Once we are aware of Him we hold our breath in adoration and infilling. We spend time in God's presence. We just wonder and adore Him. We want to be filled with His glory! That's spiritual breathing!

Ironically, Australia, which was once called "the timeless land" is today becoming increasingly the land enslaved to the clock. Yet for all of our clocks and watches, we have less time than ever. We have become dominated by time and check the time frequently – how many of you have looked at your watch in the past minute? We are more conscious of time but with less time for so many important aspects of our lives. Frequently fathers say: "Not now son, I'll play with you when I have more time." But we never have more time.

We unconsciously say: "Not now God, I'll talk with You when I have more time!" Lack of time eats away at our relationships with those we love, especially with God. Jesus asked, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" Matt 26:40 This is a difficult question not many of us answer in the affirmative today. We are pressured for time. Time can be spent on any pursuit, but time spent in prayer is considered time wasted.

1. THE PRESSURE OF THE PRESENT.

We are made conscious of the value of time. Many management books stress minutes saved enable hours to be spent in work. "The One Minute Manager" by Blanchard and Johnson, promises to increase your productivity, profits and personality, all with exercises that take only one minute! We are so conscious of time that we spend all we have doing what we have before us. Any time spent on other pursuits seems a waste of time. Time for prayer is often buried under the piles of awaiting work. As Banjo Patterson, the great Australian poet, said in Clancy of the Overflow:

"Townfolk have no time to grow,
They have no time to waste."

One football coach used to have an excuse for the team losing. He would say the team didn't really lose, it just ran out of time! Many people make the same excuse about their lack of a devotional life: they just run out of time! Some do not give prayer a priority – they claim they are going well but just run out of time! The pressure of the present moment makes us all conscious of wasting time. Time spent doing nothing is a waste. Waiting is seen as a waste. Time spent in prayer seems to be irrelevant in the light of this world's woes. We who pray seem to be like Nero: fiddling while Rome burns! I have heard that if only Schubert had been more efficient, he would have had time to finish his "Unfinished Symphony"! The pressures of the present, the tyranny of time, can remove essential beauty and truth from life and faith.

2. THE PERILS OF PRAYERLESSNESS.

Jesus taught His disciples that they "should always pray and never become discouraged." Luke 18:1. To Him, regular prayer was essential. When we cease to take time to pray, our prayerlessness causes spiritual decline, which results in despair, discouragement and spiritual death. What are we saying when we say we have not sufficient time to spend with God in prayer? Prayerlessness illustrates attitude towards God and our spiritual lives. We have all the time there is. We simply do not make prayer a priority. Other things crowd prayer out. What is that saying? Not making time to pray says we believe we are self-sufficient. What we say in effect is: "Thanks God, but I can handle this myself. I'll call you if things get sticky." The trouble with that is it does not work. We do not cope. We do not manage well by ourselves. We need God.

Not making time to pray says we do not need our access to God. Direct access to God was one thing that Adam and Eve had. When they lost their innocence and their place in the Garden of Eden they also lost direct access to God. Ever since, man has been trying to gain access to God's power, provision and presence. Man has built altars, made sacrifices, and performed all manner of rituals to gain access to God. The whole point of the coming of Christ, was to enable our sins to be forgiven through His death upon the Cross, so that we might gain access to the Father. Through the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross, we have been brought into direct access with God.

We do not need ritual, priest or temple because Christ has enabled us to have access to the Father. Now we have this access, not to pray and use the access is to deny the blood-brought privilege of our access to God. Not making time to pray says we are open to spiritual takeover. Has it occurred to you that as prayer is a two-way conversation, God may want to speak to you? If you do not make the time you will not hear what God has to say. God may dial a prayer to you but you are too busy to hear Him ring! When you live without prayer, you make yourself liable for spiritual takeover. The forces of spiritual evil will enter your life while you do not keep it spiritually occupied with the forces of good. If you have cleaned out your life, not to spend time in prayer is to open your life for spiritual takeover. Jesus once graphically explained that in the parable of the empty house. Matthew 12:43-45.

There is a direct relationship between personal righteousness and the priority given to prayer. All great and righteous people in the Kingdom of God have been people of prayer. Not making time to pray says we are open to unrighteous living. If you find a person who has fallen from spiritual grace and committed acts of which others are ashamed, you will always find that some time earlier they had ceased to be people of regular prayer habits. First prayer ceases then unrighteous living increases. John Bunyan said: "Prayer will make a man cease from sin as sin will entice a man to cease from prayer." If Satan can keep us prayerless, he can also keep us powerless. That is why Jesus was a man of such great power: He made prayer a priority.

That is why Paul was powerful, and Augustine, and Francis, and Luther, and Wesley, and every other spiritual giant. That is why in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed. Later He rebuked His disciples: "Could you not watch with me one hour?" He needed power that could only come through prayer. "Keep watch and pray." MARK 14: 38 Every Christian needs a quarter or half hour of prayer each day, except when you are extremely busy. Then you need an hour. (ST FRANCIS)

3. THE QUIETNESS OF PRAYER.

One great lesson about spiritual breathing, is, that after you breathe in, you hold your breath for a little time. That means you just be still and wonder and adore the God who loves you. You allow God's presence to fill your life. SØREN KIERKEGAARD 1813-1855 wrote "A man first thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realised that prayer is listening." That quiet listening is our ADORATION towards God. That means our silent praise. We just adore God. We can praise Him with words or song, but just silent adoration brings us to the right attitude for prayer. Don't bother to give God instructions or even ask for anything; just report for duty! In the quietness you not only adore and praise God, but you seek His INFILLING. The prayer of Paul was that Christians might be filled with the indwelling Christ. "I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, 17so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Eph 3:17

The best way of filling your life with the presence of God is through reading and studying His Word, especially if you can share it with another person in an atmosphere of praise. Again Paul advised: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Coloss 3:16.

That amazing Bible teacher who was one of the first preachers to dominate the television screen, ARCHBISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN, who died in 1979, said, "If you want to know about God, there

is only one way to do it: Get down on your knees. The man who thinks only of himself says prayers of petition. He who thinks of his neighbour says prayers of intercession. He who thinks only of loving and serving God says prayers of abandonment to God's will, and that is the prayer of the saints." Prayer starts just being in the presence of God.

But you might say, "How can I find time in my busy life?" Try going to bed earlier by watching less TV, and getting up earlier. That will give you extra time. MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE, the famous English writer and BBC broadcaster, spoke of his need to spend time in prayer sometime in 1990. He said: "I wake up in the morning, and I like to begin the day by thinking what life is about, rather than plunging into the sort of things one is going to have to do. So I like to read the Gospels, the Epistles, St. Augustine. I read a bit, and then my mind dwells on what I've read, and this I consider to be prayer."

To wake and know that God's Spirit is dwelling in you brings great assurance. As Paul wrote: "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." Rom 8:11 Prayer starts with breathing in knowledge of God's presence, which causes us to wonder and adore Him. That praise fills our hearts and we know His presence fills our being. We have not asked for anything. Just to be there is enough for now. As that grand old Scottish Bible commentator and television personality, DR WILLIAM BARCLAY, said: "When I am in trouble, and when I go to my friend, I don't want anything from him except himself. I just want to be with him for a time, to feel his comradeship, his concern, his caring round me and about me, and then to go out to a world warmer because I spent an hour with him. It must be that way with God and me. I must go to Him simply for Himself."

When Jesus asked His disciples, "Could you not watch with me for one hour?" He was asking also of us. Our prayer life grows in its power and delight when we learn to spend time in the presence of God. To breathe spiritually requires us first to breathe in and be aware of God's presence and wonder at His grace and love. Then it requires us to hold the breath and spend time in God's presence in adoration and praise, in infilling our lives with His indwelling Spirit. That is prayer at its highest. We haven't asked for a thing, but already we have been equipped and strengthened for whatever lies ahead.

Exhale - Study Three

A HEALTHY SPIRITUAL life depends upon what I have called spiritual breathing. Regular prayer builds a strong spiritual life. It starts when a person breathes in wonder and awareness of God. It continues as we hold our breath in adoration and quiet infilling of God's spirit. We then exhale in confession, supplication and thanksgiving. That relaxes us, because we breathe out toxins that have been poisoning our spirit, we are telling God about all that troubles us and we are left with a feeling of thanksgiving and relief.

CONFESSION is our first response to dealing with our sin, that inner toxin that poisons our spiritual life. Sometimes we cannot see the needs of our lives because the deeds of our lives block our access to Him. Sometimes God cannot hear the desires of our hearts because the depravity of our hearts shrieks too loudly. Hence we need to confess. The Bible promises that "if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9 Confession means simply admitting to God our guilt and wrongdoing and thinking. Your prayer life can never rise above the level of your private life. As the writer of Psalm 66 says: "I cried

out to the Lord with my tongue... If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer." V18-19 Confession is the act of inner cleansing. Of cleaning our inner lives, and of getting out into the open all that has been a spiritual toxin to our soul.

SUPPLICATION is the act of beseeching God for His intervention into the lives of others and ourselves. We need to ask God for our needs and the needs of others. Elijah prayed for rain and the drought was broken. Daniel prayed for the Jews to be delivered from a tyrant and they went free. Paul prayed that the nations might hear the Gospel, and the Word of God was spread. Our supplications are our concerns spread before God. God longs to hear our specific concerns, earnestly and continuously presented, because that is the only way our lives will be made ready for the answer.

THANKSGIVING is the exhaling of appreciation that God has heard and has answered. We show gratitude that God has blessed us in the past and will in the future. We have adored God for all that He is. Now we thank Him for all that He has done. Paul says over and over again: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful." Col 4:1 Our thanksgiving is one of the few gifts we can give to God. Jesus lived in an attitude of thanksgiving to God. At the tomb of Lazarus, he nevertheless thanked God. When he fed the multitudes He thanked God. When He prayed with the disciples, He thanked God. We can thank God for every blessing we have: for life and health and daily food, for faith and friends and every good gift; for what we have received in the past, we possess now, and are confident we shall have in the future. As Paul said to the Ephesians: "Give thanks to God the Father for everything." 5:20 1 Thess 5:18 Spiritual breathing is the healthy way to grow spiritually. We breathe in, hold, then exhale in confession, supplication and thanksgiving. Of all people of all time, Jesus Christ is the one acknowledged as the Master teacher concerning prayer. But His personal life and example inspired praying. Mark emphasized that Jesus prayed in crucial moments, including the disciples' appointment 3:13, their mission 6:30-32, and at the Transfiguration. 9:2 Jesus displayed a regular and intense prayer life. Matt. 6:5; 14:23; Mark 1:35 Luke taught that Jesus was guided by the Holy Spirit. Luke 3:22; 4:1,14,18; Luke 10:21; Acts 10:38 John reported that Jesus sometimes prayed aloud for the benefit of those present. John 11:41-42 He also reported Jesus' prayer of intercession for the first disciples and future believers. John 17 Both prayers display Jesus' unity with the Father and desire to give Him glory. John 11:4; 17:1 Matthew records the Lord's Prayer Matt. 6:9-13 given to teach the disciples how to pray. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray after watching Him pray. Luke 11:1 The prayer also provides a contrast to hypocritical prayers. Matt. 6:5 Although we often repeat this prayer, you must remember Jesus was emphasizing how to pray, not what to pray.

WHAT THEN SHOULD BE OUR PATTERN OF PRAYER?

Jesus gave us clear guidelines about effective praying: Matt 6:5-15 Jesus gave us "The Lord's Prayer" to aid our practice of prayer as a model for effective prayer. There are only 67 words in the King James version, known by heart by so many of us, yet they give us the six principles for effective prayer to guide our words and thoughts when we pray to God.

1. TURN TO GOD. Effective praying begins when we turn from our self-sufficiency to God. We start on a journey in faith. That is always the first step. God first. It is a total Biblical principle enunciated in the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other god before me." Exo 20:3 God first, is seen in the lives of great men and women of achievement: they put God first and turned to Him first. Our nation and its politicians go down the path of putting self first. But nothing comes before God. Not our needs, nor concerns nor self-interest. We must turn to God first. Jesus showed us the first principle of effective prayer: "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name," Note that we are to pray to "Our Father", not "yours" or "mine" but "Our Father", the God and Father of us all. We pray to our "Father", that is, to the Almighty, loving, providing Creator of all. No narrow sectarianism here. Our Father is the God of all cultures, races and traditions. That is why we can be one nation under God. Our God is "in Heaven". That means God is in close proximity to each of us. God is where you are. One church

notice board had the letters of its sign about next week's sermons rearranged by an atheist leaving the message: "GOD IS NO WHERE". The minister slipped just one letter across. It now read: "GOD IS NOW HERE." That is what "in heaven" means. "Hallowed be your name," simply means that God our Father is a God of holiness, truth, justice, kindness, compassion and power. The first principle of effective prayer is to turn to God, the God of each of us, who is near to us, and able for anything.

2. CONSIDER HIS CONCERNS. Effective praying starts with God and His concerns. So often people think that prayer is just rushing in with all our needs. But we are to start with God's concerns. 10 "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." A coin can blot out sun if placed over your eye. Your problems are so close to you that you can lose perspective and fail to see the divine resources. So effective prayer starts with concentration upon the power and goodwill of God. We start with confidence. "Your kingdom come." That positive affirmation engenders hope! "Your will be done" defines the extent of God's Kingdom. His kingdom consists of all who do His will and expand the territory of His blessing. So we start with God and His concerns.

3. STATE YOUR NEEDS. Effective prayer states our needs frankly. Jesus encouraged us to ask God to "give us" our needs whatever they are: Matt 7:11 "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" Matt 21:22 "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." John 14:14 "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." Matt 7:7-8 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus teaches us 11 "Give us today our daily bread." It is "today" in the immediate future. Jesus encouraged us to think about our needs on a daily basis rather than spend our energy fruitlessly worrying about what might be needed in the future.

In a memorable statement, Jesus said: Matt 6:33-34 "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Our prayers must be for our needs rather than our wants. If we were to be given all we desired it would be not good for us. But when we are given all our needs, we are satisfied. State you needs plainly.

4. SEEK HIS FORGIVENESS. Effective prayer seeks God to grant us our spiritual needs along with our physical needs. 12 "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." "Forgive us". We all need forgiveness. Every one of us. Our forgiveness however is conditional "as we also have forgiven our debtors." There is reciprocity in forgiveness. Why is a sense of our own forgiveness as well as a knowing we have forgiven others, so central to our prayers being effective? Because when you have been forgiven you know that you are not alone in bearing the load. You can feel the weight of guilt has been removed. You are assured that the resources of God are available to help you. You know that God has cleansed you from all sin. All this is ours when we forgive and are forgiven.

5. ASK FOR GUIDANCE. Effective prayer asks God then to guide us in all our daily affairs. 13 "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil one." God promised to guide those who asked Him. Prov 3:6 "In all your ways acknowledge him, and He will make your paths straight." This part of the Lord's Prayer asks that God would not lead us into a situation where we would be tempted beyond our capacity to resist. Instead we would have the inner strength to withstand the Evil One. As Phillips Brooks said: "Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."

6. DEDICATE YOUR ALL TO HIM. Effective prayer always concludes with a commitment to God of all we have and are. Many early manuscripts conclude with an ancient blessing: "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen." To God belongs everything – the kingdom, the power and the glory – everything is dedicated to God. This prayer provides us with a pattern for our practice of prayer.

In learning to pray, to breathe spiritually, no laboratory is needed only a room; no apparatus only ourselves. The living God is the field of force into which we enter in prayer. The only really total failure is to stop praying and not to begin again. A healthy spiritual life depends upon what I have called spiritual breathing. Regular prayer builds a strong spiritual life. It starts when a person breathes in wonder and awareness of God. It continues as we hold our breath in adoration and quiet infilling of God's spirit. We then exhale in confession, supplication and thanksgiving. That relaxes us, because we breathe out toxins that have been poisoning our spirit, we are telling God about all that troubles us and we are left with a feeling of thanksgiving and relief. Spiritual breathing aids a healthy Spirit.

Rest - Study Four

This is an age of anxiety. So many people are troubled, disturbed, feeling guilty and cannot find peace and rest. What they cannot understand is that through spiritual breathing they can find rest, forgiveness and peace. A healthy spiritual life depends upon what I have called spiritual breathing. Regular prayer builds a strong spiritual life. It starts when a person breathes in wonder and awareness of God. It continues as we hold our breath in adoration and quiet infilling of God's spirit. Then we exhale in confession, supplication and thanksgiving. That relaxes us, because we breathe out toxins that have been poisoning our spirit, we are telling God about all that troubles us and we are left with a feeling of thanksgiving and relief.

As a result, rest comes to our spirit, due to a sense of forgiveness and peace. Forgiveness is assured because of our prayers of confession. The Bible promises that "if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).

Rest comes because of the assurance by the Lord Jesus of our forgiveness and acceptance by God. John 5:24-25 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." We have heard His Word and believed in God who sent Jesus into the world, therefore we will not be condemned but already possess eternal life. That is the promise of Jesus. We can now rest and enjoy His peace. Nothing answers the need of the anxious hour than a discipline, regular prayer life. Spiritual breathing puts life into our spirits. The Apostle Paul understood. He lived constantly facing violence, anxiety, privation and the threat of death. But his inner poise and serenity were obvious to everyone. Many wanted the secret of his inner calm. He gave that secret to the troubled church in the Macedonian city of Philippi. PHIL 4:4-9.

1. LEARN TO REJOICE.

v4 "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Believers are to "rejoice in the Lord always" and to "again, rejoice." The double emphasis on rejoicing may imply that a single injunction might prompt the question "How can we rejoice, in view of our difficulties?" So he repeats the command, because in all the vicissitudes of the Christian life the believer could have inner peace and rest, whether in attacks from enemies of the true faith, personality clashes among believers, persecution from the world, or threat of imminent death – all of which Paul himself was experiencing at this very time – Christians are to maintain a spirit of joy in the Lord. Christians are not immune to sorrow nor insensitive to the troubles of others.

Yet Christians count the will of God their highest joy and so know inner peace and joy in every circumstance. Christians who live with deep, inner joy have an internal strength that nothing can overcome and nothing destroy. Peace fills their lives.

2. LEARN TO BE GENTLE.

v5 "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Believers are to be gentle to all. The term "gentleness" is difficult to translate. It means kind, forbearing, big-hearted. I translate it as "magnanimous". The problem is that the word "gentle" in English has changed meaning. It is a soft word now, but it used to refer to a person who was so strong they could afford to be big-hearted. A gentleman was a man so strong nothing could cower him and make him mean-spirited. Christians are to be so strong they can yield their personal rights and to show consideration to others. That includes even persecutors, false teachers, enemies. That was the example we see in Jesus as He faced the Cross and prayed forgiveness for His enemies. Such an attitude cannot be defeated. Paul encourages his readers by reminding them the second coming of the Lord is near. There is a glorious prospect in view for believers at Christ's return. When Christ comes He will settle all differences and will bring the consummation that will make most of our human differences seem trifling. No wonder we can be at peace and rest in confidence.

3. LEARN TO DEFEAT ANXIETY.

v6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Believers should be prayerful instead of anxious. Prayer defeats anxiety.

Christians do not have to fret and worry about our circumstances. Instead we trust our Father because He hears our prayers for what we need. The answer to anxiety is prayer for what we need. But “thanksgiving” should accompany our praying, for we know whatever God sends is for our good.

4. LEARN TO ACCEPT PEACE.

v7 “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” When we pray we turn from anxiety to prayer with thanksgiving. The result is that we have a serenity of mind. We are at rest. When we accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord we are given the peace of right relationships with God. God gives us His own peace. Now when we pray we discovered a serenity of soul and a peace of “which transcends all understanding.” For the peace of God not only suffices but far surpasses human comprehension. It acts as a sentry to guard the believer’s personality from all anxiety and despair.

5. LEARN TO THINK POSITIVELY.

v8 “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Believers must think and do what is morally and spiritually excellent. This involves centering their minds on positive things and then putting into practice what they have learned from Paul’s teaching and example.

Paul gives us an outline of positive thought. My dear old friend who helped me so much as a young Superintendent, Dr Norman Vincent Peale of New York, showed people how they could find inner peace and power through positive thinking. All these virtues are found in the New Testament teachings of Jesus. We are to think of whatever is “True” or valid, reliable, and honest. Truth characterizes God Rom 3:4 and should also characterize believers. “Noble” is used in the New of church officers, that is, possessing a quality that makes them worthy of respect. “Right” refers to what is upright or just, conformable to God’s standards. “Pure” emphasizes moral purity. “Lovely” relates to what is pleasing or agreeable. “Admirable” denotes what is praiseworthy, and rings true to the highest standards.

Paul concludes “if anything is excellent and praiseworthy” then we should continually center our minds on such thoughts as these. We can defeat narrow, negative thoughts that poison the mental processes by thinking as Christians should – positively!

6. LEARN TO REST.

Finally, Paul teaches us how to find peace and rest by summing up: v9 “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Since Paul himself had been their teacher and example, what they had learned from him they were to keep on practicing. Christians learn the truth, put it into practice, and then find the God of peace is with them.

Olusegun Obasanjo was languishing in a prison cell for a crime he did not commit. But last month Obasanjo was elected president of Nigeria and he attributes the turnaround in his life to his faith in God. The story begins 20 years ago when Obasanjo became the first African military leader to turn over political power voluntarily to a democratically elected government. He retired to his farm like Nelson Mandela. But it wasn’t long before the Nigerian military once again seized political power.

Obasanjo became an outspoken critic of the military regime, accusing the leader, Sani Abacha, of turning Nigeria into a giant prison.

Abacha had Obasanjo imprisoned. International diplomatic pressures spared his life. In prison he experienced a life-transforming spiritual renewal of a personal faith in Christ. He said imprisonment was "God's way of slowing me down to hear His message and His words." Nigeria's military rule came to an end with Abacha's death in 1998. Obasanjo was released from prison and ran for president. His election is almost as improbable as his conversion. Half of Nigeria's population is Muslim and Muslims dominate public life. Yet Obasanjo persuaded Nigerians to make him the nation's first democratically elected president in 20 years. After his election last month, Obasanjo called for a moral rearming of Nigeria. He's made human rights a top priority in that country, especially religious freedom. African experts sing Obasanjo's praises. President Jimmy Carter says, "I don't think there is an African leader, with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela, who is better respected as Obasanjo."

President Obasanjo gives Christ the credit for his remarkable story. He quotes Scripture in his speeches and in interviews. Not long ago he even shared his testimony before a screening of the "Jesus" film, saying, "Without Jesus, as president I can do nothing. With Him, I can do all things." Obasanjo has about him a remarkable inner peace and calm that is obvious to all who meet him. He has discovered the secret of God's rest and peace through constant prayer.

God may be using Obasanjo's conversion in a prison to reverse the fortunes of Nigeria, the largest country in Africa. In turn, that transformation may spread across the entire African continent. Obasanjo's godly leadership has the potential to work great changes in a country where one in six Africans live.

This is an age of anxiety for all of us in whatever continent we live. So many people are troubled, disturbed, feeling guilty without inner peace and rest. Yet through spiritual breathing they can find rest, forgiveness and peace. Regular prayer has us breathe in wonder and awareness of God. It continues as we hold our breath in adoration and quiet infilling of God's spirit. When we exhale in confession, supplication and thanksgiving, we breathe out toxins that have been poisoning our spirit. We tell God about what troubles us and we finish with thanksgiving.

Then rest comes to our spirit, peace comes to our mind and serenity floods our soul. We possess the peace of God which passes all human understanding.

Repeat - Study Five

Many people face problems but do not persist until they have overcome them. Too many of our fellows belong to the Quitter's Club. They decide that when the going gets tough, the tough will get going, right out of the place! Educational difficulties cause some young people to leave school, perhaps dropping out of society for a time. Marriage difficulties cause many divorces without the spouses trying to work out their difficulties before running away. Employment difficulties cause many people out of a job to become dispirited and give up working altogether. Spiritual difficulties cause some to lose heart and not continue in their worship and faith. Health difficulties cause many long term suffering and hope bringing on early death. Business difficulties cause some people to quit preferring to give up rather than make a go of it.

This is no idle complaint. It is the heart-felt cry of a pastor who does not want people suffering because they give up too soon. Why do people lack persistence? Discoveries in science come only after persistence. Athletes win only after persistent training. Students achieve only after persisting in studies. Marriages last only because ordinary people have worked at them. Stable family life is maintained because parents and children work at their family relationships. Prayers are answered and events are changed because believers persist in prayer. Anything worthwhile comes because someone has stuck at it. It is a law of life that it is always too soon to quit.

Yet for many people in Australia, this is an era of quitters. They quit, drop out, give up, walkout, withdraw, escape, depart and lack persistence. Membership is easy in "The Quitter's Club". No-one imagines life is easy – but it can become meaningful. Persistence is a vital quality and it is equally essential in a person's prayer life. Too many give up on prayer as a spiritual force simply because they quit too soon.

1. JESUS INSTRUCTS US TO PRAY PERSISTENTLY.

Everyone faces tough times, but persistent prayer can handle every problem. Persistent prayer overcomes anger, anxiety, criticism, disappointment, discouragement, despair, fatigue, nervousness, temptation and sorrow. That is why Jesus taught us to persist. In the time of Jesus, Jews "waited before the Lord". Believers were to "be patient and wait for the Lord to act" Psalm 37:7. The Psalmist cries, "From the depths of my despair I call to you Lord, Hear my cry, O Lord; Listen to my call for help! I wait eagerly for the Lord's help, and in His word I trust. I wait for the Lord more eagerly than the watchmen wait the dawn." Psalm 130:1,5-6

The Apocrypha has a text – "Be not impatient in prayer" Sirach 7:10. For those who wait, God will honour, answer, and provide spiritual strength. The result of waiting patiently upon the Lord in prayer is that we are endowed with spiritual strength: "Those who wait upon the Lord, who trust in Him for help, will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak." Isaiah 40:31.

Through waiting patiently and praying persistently, a believer learns to trust God, find strength under strain, and a spirit of expectancy. Successful people persist until they outlast their problems.

2. WHY DOES GOD WANT US TO PERSIST?

Jesus stressed God's desire for us to persist in prayer. Jesus encourages us in our persistent prayer. He said that His Father will "give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking." The parable says that God is like a man who gets up in the middle of the night to give a neighbour some bread because he had unexpected visitors. "I tell you, he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Luke 11:9-10

Jesus stressed we should be persistent in prayer in another parable about a judge who has been very slow in giving his judgements. A woman who was being disadvantaged pestered him constantly until he gave judgement. If an unjust judge responds to persistence how much more quickly will God who is totally just. "Will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will He keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly." Luke 18:7-8 Luke says "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Luke 18:1

There are two clear expectations:

a. We are to travail in prayer. That means we must grimly labour and agonise over the concerns of our prayers. Spurgeon explains: "God does not hear us because of the length of our prayer, but because of the sincerity of it. Prayer is not measured by the yard, not weighed by the pound. It is the might and the force of it, the truth and reality of it, the energy and intensity of it." God expects us to use energy and intensity in our prayers. That is how we should feel in prayer. The Jewish patriarch Jacob wanted God's blessing. He wrestled with God and said "I will not let you go until you bless me." He travailed in prayer.

b. We are to prevail in prayer. That means we must desire persistently what we pray. Jesus said: "I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Mk 11:24 We are to pray with confidence and tenacity. Travailing in prayer is how we feel when we pray; prevailing in prayer is how we fight when we pray. Prevailing in prayer means to confidently, optimistically, patiently, and tenaciously pray until God opens Heaven's gates and the opposition to our prayers crumbles before us. George Mueller said: "The great point is never to give up until the answer comes. I have been praying for 63 years and 8 months for one man's conversion. He is not saved yet, but he will be. How can it be otherwise? I am praying." But Mueller never saw him saved, because it was only as Mueller's casket was being lowered into the grave that the man gave his heart to God. George Mueller's prayers were answered. He never quit praying.

3. PERSISTING BUT NOT PESTERING?

There is a difference between persisting and pestering God. Jesus taught us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." That meant we should pray daily for our needs. But when God has given us such an answer to our prayers, we must accept His answer and go ahead trusting God even if we cannot see the answer.

For example, Jesus prayed three times: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:42 From that time on, He went to the Cross without asking for it to be removed from Him. He had accepted God's answer. He refused to pester God. Paul wrote about what was troubling him: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor 12:8 Paul had the answer, so he refused to pester God. He went ahead in God's power which enabled him to cope.

When should we persist in prayer? The Bible gives many examples requiring persistent prayer which is not pestering God. We should persist in prayer for:

- believers who fall into sin that they might repent;
- illness of body or mind which God is willing to heal;
- peace on earth and God's blessing upon peacemakers;
- spiritual growth so we can conform to Christ's image;
- enemies who persecute us, for their forgiveness;
- workers to bring people to God's salvation.

In our persisting we are not pestering God, but we are doing what He wants us to do.

James the brother of Jesus says "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly." James 5:17 The passage means "he prayed his prayers". Some of us "say" a prayer, but Elijah "prayed his prayers" with persistence. Epaphras was a companion of Paul and a prisoner with Paul. He was praised twice for his devotion to the ministry. In his letter to the Church at Colossae, Paul wrote: "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." Col 4:12 Epaphras was a faithful, persistent prayer.

Jesus was committed to His prayer life. In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord and the disciples are weary from the stress of the late night plotting of enemies to have them murdered. The disciples are asked to wait in the security of a dark Olive Grove. But their weariness overcomes them and they fall asleep. Jesus went from them about the distance of a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed. "And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Luke 22:44 His example encourages us to persist even when tired. I received a reply the other day from a friend of many of us here at Wesley Mission. Keith Walkerden wrote:

"Dear Gordon, Thank you for your kind note to me concerning my operation. I have two further minor operations to undergo after which my sight should be back to normal. Your prayers and those of our family and friends have been extremely important to myself.

I know that many worry about the efficacy of prayer, and we all have the experience of knowing that in many cases the outcome for which we have prayed so fervently doesn't occur. I want you to know that Sheila and I have benefited from your prayers; and not only because the operation was successful.

The sequence of events was bewilderingly fast. On a Friday afternoon we heard that, while they were confident of saving my life, the tumour in my eye was inoperable: then that there was one person in England who was doing a controversial operation that might save my sight. On Thursday we were flying to Manchester for an examination on Monday; and if given the go-ahead an operation on Tuesday. That week was one of tremendous stress for both of us. Yet in spite of all the pressure we felt both hopeful and comforted. I remarked to Sheila: "I feel bathed in prayer".

We had a wonderful sense of being supported and buoyed up by the prayers and thoughts of our family, our Church, and groups of friends around Australia. It was for us a strong spiritual experience. While the tumour was larger than our surgeon had previously operated on, it was possible to perform the surgery. We felt buoyed up by prayer. I told my surgeon I felt surrounded by love and prayer. Irrespective of whether the operation was successful or not your prayers were vital to our well being. They were a positive force that met our need at a most traumatic time in our lives. Thank you. Keith Walkerden."

The persistence in prayer releases the power of prayer. That is why prayer must be repeated if we are to spiritually breathe.