

## **A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY:** *Revised*

**Intro:** At Redeemer we talk about how 'the gospel' is the cure for whatever ails you, but the gospel does not heal and grow you simply by knowing the doctrine. (It is not less than that--but it takes more.) The gospel must be 'prayed in' to the heart and experienced if it is to shape our whole lives. Put another way (just as valid!) the gospel must be used to experience and meet God himself.

Traditional evangelical Protestant spirituality is 'the Quiet Time': a) I study the Bible. I learn what the Bible teaches. b) Then I pray. I pray for God to help me do what I've learned, and I pray for the needs of my person, family, church, and world. However, many Protestants and Catholics realized that such a practice never gets us to the experience of God that the Psalmists aspired to, often had, and called others to (Psalm 27, 63, 84). The "secret" (if that is the right term) is discipline of a 'middle' practice (meditation) between Bible reading and prayer and the expectation of a final practice (contemplation) that is the fruit of all we do. Martin Luther clearly directs and discusses all four practices in *A Simple Way to Pray* while John of the Cross wrote: "Seek in *reading* (lectio) and you will find in *meditation*; knock in *prayer* and it will be opened in *contemplation*. (Sayings #158)

### **The Practice of Prayer**

#### **1. Lectio: Reading**

**Description:** *Lectio Divina* or "divine reading" sometimes refers to the entire 4 parts of prayer, but usually it refers to a devoted study and consideration of a text of the Scripture. Its goal is to personalize the word and to hear God speaking to you here and now. Lectio assumes that you already understand the passage in a general way. If the text is confusing or opaque to you, you need to study it first. Lectio 'proper' means to read it gently and slowly, aiming more at aims at weighing and tasting the truth as it goes by.

#### **Practice:**

- If you have longer amount of time, *study* the text first. Outline the text. Then
  - If *narrative* passage, ask: 1) What is the problem--what task is made difficult or threatened? 2) What is the resolution--how is the task completed? 3) What is the purpose of the story teller?
  - If *discourse* passage, ask: 1) What words/ideas are repeated or central--and why? 2) What comparisons or metaphors are used--and what do they show? 3) What cause-effect or general-to-particular relationships can be seen between clauses or paragraphs--and what do they teach?
  - After either kind, ask: What do I learn 1) about God or Christ: a) Who he is, b) what he's done. 2) about me or us, 3) about our salvation: a) cross, b) community, c) new creation, 4) about how we should live: a) examples to follow, b) commands to obey, c) promises to claim
  - Look up difficult words or comments in reference material. Finally--outline it again.
- Then, do the slow 'spiritual reading'.
  - Prepare: Be aware of his presence; Seek full attentiveness; Know he wants to connect
  - Read slowly. When a thought or phrase or word captures your attention, you stop and dwell on it. Some things will 'resonate' or strike you or surprise you.
  - A good method: Repeat the word(s) or phrase over and over internally or out loud--staying with it till you've drained the new thought or sense you've just had. Then move on until another part engages you.

- Underline or otherwise note those parts that touched you as you read. You would also profit from reading the text this way at least twice and maybe more.

## **2. Meditatio: Reflecting**

**Description:** Now in meditation, we take the 'radioactive'. Phrases, verses, and ideas and we now reflect on the truth deeply. The purpose is to bring the mind into contact with the heart so as to move into a deeper sense of God's (and his truth's) reality and presence. Meditation is not simply thinking, nor simply praying (see Ps 103): It is *the descent of mind with truth into the inmost heart, until whole being yearns for God.*

### **Practice:**

- Method #1 - Choose 1-2 verses or sentences (from your *lectio*).
  - Go through the text repeatedly, each time putting the vocal emphasis on a different word.
  - Ask: "How does this emphasis bring out another aspect of truth? What particular truth does this word bring out? What would be different if the word was missing?"
  - Ask: "why is God showing me this now, today?"
- Method #2 - Choose 1-2 verses or sentences (from your *lectio*).
  - **Teaching:** What is the basic truth or teaching this conveys?
  - **Adoration:** How can I adore God for this? (What attribute does it show?)
  - **Confession:** What wrong thoughts, feelings, behavior happen when this is forgotten?
  - **Thanks:** How is Jesus the ultimate revelation of this attribute and/or the ultimate answer to this sin? How is this sin being caused by an inordinate hope for some-one or some-thing to give me the satisfaction that only Jesus can really give me?
  - **Supplication:** What do I need from God if I am to realize this truth in my life?

## **3. Oratio: Praying**

**Description:** While *lectio* is listening intently to God, and *meditatio* is intently speaking to your own heart, *oratio* is turning back to God and speaking to him about what you are learning and hearing. Prayer after meditation is almost always more engaged at a deeper level of spiritual awareness. You begin with praying your meditations. Then (if allowed--see below) you can proceed to 'kingdom prayer' and petition for needs.

### **Practice:**

- Pray "Adoration" back to him. Tell him what you love and adore about him. Visualize: how the world would be different if everyone saw this glory. Yearn for it.
- Pray "Confession" back to him. Admit what you have done, what you are. Visualize: What would you be like if this truth were explosively present in your life? Yearn for it. Have a "colloquy": Imagine God responding to your repentance in words of other Scripture.
- Pray "Thanks for Christ" back to him. Remember some narrative from the life of Christ where he exhibited the trait you are thanking him for. Thank him for what he's done.
- Pray "Supplication" back to him. Ask him for what you need to be and do what this truth points to. Now move on to more general kingdom prayer--asking for the "kingdom to come" in your own life, in the lives of people you know and love, in the needs and the life of the city and the world.

## **4. Contemplatio: Sensing**

**Description:** Usually, though not always, during *Lectio* or *Meditatio*, or *Oratio*, there is an engaging and you begin to get a 'sense on the heart' of the cognitive truth(s) you are reflecting on. More moderate levels can be described as "sweetness" (Ah!) or "illumination" (Aha!) At the more profound levels (there seem to be several), you experience what has been called "infused contemplation" ("Infused" means 'given' or

'poured in' from outside.) General description: a) there is a sense of the reality of God's presence, b) the soul becomes much more passive than active, receiving, c) it receives enormous assurance of belonging to God, d) it can be indescribable, e) it may be physically affecting at the time, and f) it results in permanent changes in the life. See Ps.27:1; Rom.8:15-16.

**Practice:** "Contemplation" is really a pure gift (as 'infused' indicates). The moments can happen anywhere in your time of devotion--or anywhere. It may be "fleeting or prolonged, subtle or pronounced". It can mingle with the flow of your meditation and prayer or even the lectio. Your God is passing by, and you aren't consumed because you are hid in Jesus. It is thus not completely proper to speak of "method" except to say this: since it essentially a wordless gazing and admiration, don't try to stick to any scheme or method if it comes strongly. Luther said "when the Holy Spirit starts this--break off from your meditation routine. It is clarity-reality, an ability to rest, an ability to delight in his beauty for itself. I would "try" to contemplate at the very end of every devotional period, if it hasn't 'happened'. I simply try to gaze adoringly at what I've seen of him that day, without inner comment. But real contemplation is out of our control.

## The Progress of Prayer

Many Catholic theologians of prayer (Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross) have spoken of 'levels' of prayer, that come close to the descriptions of Protestants like Owen and Jonathan Edwards.

	<u>Central form of Prayer</u>	<u>Character growth</u>	<u>Experience</u>
1)	<b>Vocal Prayer</b>	Avoid major sins	Peace of conscience
2)	<b>Meditation</b>	Committed to growth Truth	Illumination, with dryness; beginning to <u>long</u>
	This is Teresa's 'second mansion' and John of the Cross's 'night of sense'. Though there are some moments in which the truth becomes sweet and real during meditation, much of this stage of prayer is an experience of wanting God more than we sense him. That leads to a great deal of dryness. But this must be endured and worked through. It is important to have some disciplined methods of meditation during this time which forces you away from completely academic Bible study. John is especially helpful in distinguishing this 'night of sense' from depression or sickness. 1) Meditation becomes almost impossible, terrible dryness in prayer, but 2) when away from prayer does not experience same despondancy or 'darkness' and 3) there is still a willingness to do <i>lectio</i> and pray and show God honor.		
3)	<b>Affective Prayer</b>	Identify heart idols Hope	Recollection, with desertion; woundings, distress
	This is Teresa's 'third mansion' and it contains some wonderful times of 'recollection' in which the mind becomes extremely collected and focused and God's truth becomes quite real to you. However, this is also John of the Cross' 'night of spirit' in which your idols and sins are more real to you than ever. That may make this stage very painful, though not necessarily. The new discoveries of your specific controlling sins can be a real token that God is working in your life and can be quite encouraging.		
4)	<b>Contemplation</b> (“Infused contemplation”)	Replace heart idols Faith	“Prayer of Quiet”; high assurance of sonship
	This is Teresa's 'fourth mansion' and I believe it contains what Rom.8:16 calls the 'witness' of the Spirit. This is a consciousness of God's love which comes in very 'sensibly' and does not appear to be the same as the sweetness and reality that gradually dawns on you as a result of your meditation. Like Rom8:16 and 5:5 says, it is something 'infused' or poured in from outside--it is in addition to what your own spirit is saying. It is high assurance of your sonship.		
5)	<b>Glory Prayer</b>	“The world sings to you” Beauty	“Prayer of Union”; ecstatic or abiding joy

All the mystical authors--from Edwards to Lloyd-Jones to the Catholic mystics, talk about increasing degrees of infused contemplation. It can differ in a) length (from sporadic to much more abiding) and b) degree. Edwards particularly was adept in describing these higher experiences as a rejoicing in God for his own sake--for the sheer beauty of who he is. JE believed true prayer moves beyond even gratitude--in which we are adoring God for how we have profited from God--to an aesthetic delight in who God is in himself. Thus we might have deep experiences of ecstatic joy over his sovereignty and holiness. In a famous 'Miscellany' on Holiness, JE says that when you are rejoicing in God for his own sake--"the whole world sings to a holy soul". You begin to appreciate everything in creation--not for what it profits or does for you, but what it shows us about the glory of God. These 'highest' experiences seem to vary a lot. Teresa divides them in to another three or four 'mansions' but I have real doubts that it can be broken down so specifically. (But then--what in the world do I know???)