

## KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL PRAYER: SPIRITUAL BREATHING - INHALE

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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 forever 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.