

A while back, I was having a conversation with a friend of mine in Muncie, someone who goes to Muncie Friends Church, where my son is pastor. I don't remember what we were talking about, maybe it was a community art festival that she would like to see happen. My advice was to pray about it, and she looked at me with an expression on her face that said, "Thanks, but that's not particularly helpful." I had thought praying was just the thing to do. And as I pondered her response, I began to think about what exactly I meant by prayer.

I've called this message "Thoughts on Prayer," and it's my attempt to unpack my advice to my friend. So, what I'm offering you this morning is a collection of (surprise!) thoughts on prayer. It's not an exhaustive collection – I could say a lot more – but it does pull together some hopefully helpful insights. Because it's a collection, this message is not three points with an introduction and a conclusion. Think of it more like a bouquet of flowers.

Oh! One more thing. I've included a repeating refrain, "This I know experientially." It's something I've adapted from George Fox's *Journal*, and it means that I know whatever it is from the inside, from my own experience.

Ready?

(1) As a young child, I was taught a bedtime prayer that might be familiar to you:

Now I lay me down to sleep.  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I was quite a bit older before I realized what the words meant. It seems a little creepy to remind small children every night that they might die before morning. When I looked this prayer up, I found that it's from at least as far back as the early 1700s. In those days, it might have been a real worry that a child might not wake up in the morning.

(2) For much of my childhood and youth, the Quaker churches where my family attended had three regular meetings every week:

- a. Sunday morning Sunday school and worship;
- b. Sunday evening worship, which usually included more singing and less preaching,
- c. and Wednesday night prayer meeting.

We often went to all three.

I have a very clear memory of one Wednesday night prayer meeting. I believe I was around 12 or 14. We (my mother and I and others, maybe 10 or 12 people) gathered in the basement of Piedmont Friends Church, in Portland, Oregon. We sat in a circle of unpadded metal folding chairs, those kind of putty-colored metal chairs. Glenn Armstrong, the pastor, had a few words to say, maybe a devotional, also probably mentioning and asking for specific prayer concerns.

When it was time to start praying, we got up from our chairs and knelt on the floor (tan-speckled linoleum on concrete, as I remember it) with our heads bent, our elbows leaning on the chair seat, and our eyes closed. Then people prayed out loud for the concerns that had been mentioned. Florence Snow. Dave Haworth. Louie and Minnie Perry. The Steigers, with their German accent. The prayers these faithful people offered were not short. After a while, my knees got cold and started hurting. It's hard to pay attention to long prayers when your knees are cold and hurting. This I know experientially. 😊

(3) Then there's the Bible verse that says, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). If that verse means that I have to stay on my knees on a cold, hard floor all the time, I'm in trouble. It's just not happening.

But I don't think that's what praying without ceasing means. I think unceasing prayer is a lot like mindfulness: "bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>).

- Praying without ceasing can mean listening to God, resting in God's presence.
- It can mean cultivating an awareness of gratitude.
- It can mean, when someone comes to mind, sending positive thoughts their direction.

- It can mean, instead of worrying about something or someone, holding that up to God's Light and Love. When we do that, it changes the energy from the negativity of worry to engaging in a positive practice of care.

One British Quaker, Elfrida Vipont Foulds in the 1980s, put it this way:

I read that I was supposed to make 'a place for inward retirement and waiting upon God' in my daily life, as the *Queries* in those days expressed it... I began to realise, first that I needed some kind of inner peace, or inward retirement, or whatever name it might be called by; and then that these apparently stuffy old Friends were really talking sense. If I studied what they were trying to tell me, I might possibly find that the 'place of inward retirement' was not a place I had to go to, it was there all the time. I could know the 'place of inward retirement' wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, and find the spiritual refreshment for which, knowingly or unknowingly, I was longing, and hear the voice of God in my heart. Thus I began to realise that prayer was not a formality, or an obligation, it was a *place* which was there all the time and always available. (Elfrida Vipont Foulds, 1983, 2.21, <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/2/>)

This I know experientially.

(4) Prayers have power when we are walking in the Light, when we are listening to God and following God's call.

Isaiah 58:6-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator<sup>[a]</sup> shall go before you,  
 the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
 9Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
 you shall cry for help, and [God] will say, Here I am.

Lessons from Isaiah 58:

- Being righteous, being a good person, being in relationship with God is not necessarily about showing up at church every Sunday. (Though that's a good thing too.)
- Being a good person isn't all about how "holy" I am.

Being in relationship with God is about following God's heart. And where is God's heart? God's heart is with the oppressed, with the hungry, with the homeless, with people in need, with people in our own families.

And when we're following God's heart, we shall call on God, and God will say, Here I am. This I know experientially.

(5) When I was in seminary, in the mid-80s, I took a class on healing. Among other things, we read some books about healing life's hurts or healing of the memories.

Aside: all of us have these hurts. As a wise woman once said, we all have our own pool of tears. All of us. Sometimes those hurts can hold us back from being and becoming. Sometimes those hurts can make us difficult to live with. This I know experientially. 😊

So, what can we do? The past is past, we might say. But if the past is still causing us pain, it's not really past. You know?

I remember reading, in one of the books for that seminary class, about a woman who was really struggling with things that had happened to her as a child. And the helpful people who were working with her asked, where was God when those hurtful things were happening to you? "I don't know," she said. "I felt so all alone." Where *is* God when children are hurting? This book said God is there, weeping. [Pause.]

In connection with those hurts, I have learned that there's a kind of prayer that can bring God's loving presence into our memories. Memories of pain and disillusionment, betrayal and self-doubt don't just go away.

But as we remember those hurts, this kind of prayer suggests that we can imagine God there with us. God grieving over our pains and losses. God shedding tears with us. God being with us. It's a powerful thing to bring God into those parts of our lives.

In the late 90s, when I was packing to move from Indianapolis to Charlottesville, to begin a graduate program at the University of Virginia, I came across a bunch of photographs of me as a child. Because I'm a first-born, these were not 5 by 7 snaps. These were 8 by 10 studio photos of me at 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, 1, 2, and 3 years old. I decided to get frames for these pictures, and I put them up in my bedroom in my apartment in Charlottesville. And I prayed for her. I prayed for the little girl I used to be. I prayed for that little girl who still lives in here. She's happier now.

The hurtful things don't go away. But we can experience healing and comfort in prayer. Healing of past things can help us live more fully now. This I know experientially.

(6) Sometimes Quakers talk about holding someone in the Light. What does that mean? Friend Phil Gulley writes about it this way:

We Quakers say "I am holding you in the Light" when we intend to pray for someone, when we want for someone what God wants for them – peace and healing and well-being and soundness of mind and body and spirit. ...

To say to someone, "I will hold you in the Light," is the verbal equivalent of lifting them up to God, lifting them up to light and goodness, so they can have hope and peace.

To hold someone in the Light is to stand beside them when they are unable to stand for themselves. (<https://philipgulley.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Quaker-Sayings-9-SECURE.pdf>)

I found a similar thought in Anne Lamott's book, *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Here's a bit of what she says in the section on help:

When I pray, which I do many times a day, I pray for a lot of things. I ask for health and happiness for my friends, and for their children. This is okay to do, to ask God to help them have a sense of peace, and for them to feel the love of God. I pray for our leaders to act in the common good, or at least the common slightly better. 😊 I pray that aid and comfort be rushed to people after catastrophes.... It is also okay to ask that my cat have an easy death. Some of my friends' kids are broken and the kids' parents are living in that, and other friends' marriages are broken, and every family I love has serious problems involving someone's health or finances. But we can be big in prayer, and trust that God won't mind if we pray about the cat....

Is God going to say, 'Sorry, we don't have enough for the cat?' I don't think so.

I ask for help for this planet and for her poor, {13/14} and for the suffering people in my little galaxy. ...

I can picture God saying: 'Okay, hon. I'll be here when you're done with your list.' Then [God] goes back to knitting new forests ... until I hit rock bottom. And when I finally do, there may be hope.

There's freedom in hitting bottom, in seeing that you won't be able to save or rescue your daughter, her spouse, his, or your career, relief in admitting you've reached the place of great unknowing. This is where restoration can begin, because when you're still in the state of trying to fix the unfixable, everything bad is engaged.... {14/15}

Help. Help us walk through this. Helps us come through.

It is the first great prayer. ...

There are no words for the broken hearts of people losing people, so I ask God, with me in tow, to respond to them with graciousness and encouragement enough for the day. ... {16/17}

In prayer, [Anne Lamott says,] I see the suffering bathed in light. In God, there is no darkness. I see God's light permeate them, soak into them, guide their feet. I want to tell God what to do: 'Look, Pal, this is a catastrophe. You have got to shape up.' But it wouldn't work. So I pray for people who are hurting, that they be filled with air and light. Air and light heal; they somehow get into those dark, musty places, like spiritual antibiotics.

This I know experientially.

(7) About thirty years ago, I was introduced to a book called *Prayer and Our Bodies* by Flora Slosson Wuellner. I have used one of her meditations repeatedly, especially in unprogrammed worship.

"God's love and light forever embrace us whether we pray or not," she writes. "But through prayer we are consenting, claiming, and *internalizing God's offered healing*, which then becomes empowered in our lives and bodies" (p. 26, her emphasis).

I would like to close by leading you in a short meditation from *Prayer and Our Bodies*.

In a comfortable, relaxed position...

No need to kneel on a cold, hard, floor. Get a bit comfortable. Do you need to adjust? Close your eyes if you want to.

In a comfortable, relaxed position, think of God's nearness and love around you, flowing through you like warm light, color, water, or wind; or think of love coming to you through Jesus or some person whom you love and trust.... {26/27} [Wait.]

Gently breathe, and pay attention to the breathing. Think of each breath as the breath of life from God. Sense the healing light flowing into your body with each breath. \*\*\* {27/28} [Wait]

Thank your body for taking [on] the special tasks and challenges of this phase of your life. Ask God to open you to the powers and delights of this special phase, as well as the special problems. Let your whole body, just as it is now, be held closely in God's nearness and love, as one who is precious to God and valued by God.

Rest in this strong love, breathing gently.