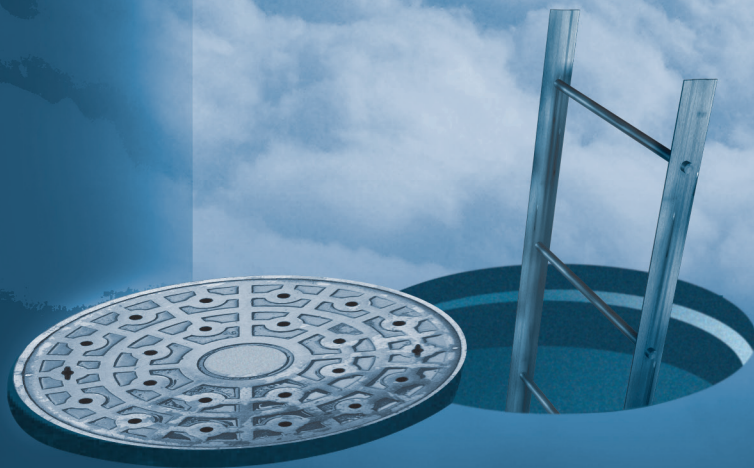


Shane Varcoe

Prayer

The language
of relationship



Foreword by Rev. Dr K. 'John' Smith

Founder and International President of God's Squad Motorcycle Club

Shane Varcoe

Prayer

The Language of Relationship

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Foreword

Many years ago, when Jesus, finally sorted me out for a lifetime commitment, I first learned the beauty of the Siamese twins – prayer attached to the genius of the Old Book. A little circle of gum trees became the sacred space for my daily tryst with God. I devoured scriptures – Genesis to Revelation – in huge chunks until it was familiar territory within a few years. The sometimes-bitter pills of divine rebuke were swallowed with prayer. The face of God, and the heart of God made all creation come alive, in those hours of solitude and divine encounter. Those days of disciplined, 5.00am devotions have been the enduring foundation for over forty years of ministry, communication and care in the secular market place.

But in those days there was much to encourage prayer. The meal table was a place for daily devotions. TV dinners today have undermined that family call to prayer. Books on prayer abounded. We all read them if we were committed — E.M. Bounds, R.A. Torrey, C.H. Spurgeon, Andrew Murray, the list seems endless. Of course discipleship required much reading of scripture and much reading of the myriad of books on prayer, written by those whose biographies of Christian exploits enthused us for personal holiness and ministry. Definitely **prayer was a necessary discipline.**

Then came the counterculture, the hasty cultural revolution of the '60s and '70s. The weaknesses of my father's generation were not only recognised, they were amplified and exaggerated. Feeling guilt about prayerlessness, or non-attendance at church, was written off as legalism, or repressive religious upbringing. God was all loving, and like the indulgent parents of the Benjamin Spock '60s, he was expected to be there when we wanted him, without the purposeful nurture of relationship on the part of his children. We learned what the great German theologian called *cheap grace*. Even preaching about personal piety and devotional life to the youth of that era was sometimes resisted, and even mocked as legalism.

The Jesus Movement youth leaders taught hippie converts daily from scripture.

They were initially almost fanatical about prayer. In joyful communal gatherings and alone in the bush they prayed long passionate prayers. They loved Jesus and could go little time without a conversation with him. One hippie convert, recalling the days of real commitment long after wrote:

Someday, don't go home. Tell your kids that you've decided to forsake it all for Jesus,

because that's where your heart really belongs, and everywhere else you put it only makes you ache to go back, to take up his cross, to walk down the road with a light step, to cram into crowded vans and juggle babies and discuss all aspects of life, to pray long prayers while the meals get cold, to sing about everything, wherever you are.

Then the spirit of the new age spread its influence. Memories of great prayer gatherings and personal commitment to a devotional life faded in the development of a more worldly-wise lifestyle.

If some of the older saints had tended towards legalism (most of the godly ones I had known were just close to Jesus), the new generation was becoming what theologians call antinomian ('nomos' means law, hence 'anti-nomianism'). Considerable research indicates that parents who are indulgent, and who do not discipline their children, produce roughly the same inflated statistics of dysfunction, substance abuse, and deviant behaviors as those who are authoritarian. Without a centering of our lives through prayer, spiritual and even moral dysfunction seems inevitable. The emerging generation was fast losing the wisdom of the ages. At a youth camp, when I spoke of the need for dedicated personal, private devotional time, I was amazed to find kids thought my mention of a *quiet time* (the term for personal daily prayer and Bible reading in my generation), was a minute of silence like we have on an ANZAC day parade!

Thankfully I sense a new hunger among many young people for a holy, loving, communicative life with God, on a daily, even constant basis. Many of the old devotional and prayer promotional books are out of print. Many prayer classics didn't address the particular confusions of our age. In a stoic, disciplinarian culture, the disciplines of prayer are part of life. A stern father may be a very loving one. This is the age of relativism, materialism, and the kind of individualism that believes in non-traditional freedom to create your own world and even religion. Thus there is a need for some new voices, to call us back to habits of the heart that embrace regular, meaningful, earnest prayer.

Shane Varcoe has responded to that need with a very readable book, replete with engaging personal discipleship experiences, compelling reasons, biblical principles, and some great practical helps. His special programme sheets for the organisation of a systematic prayer life and personal reflection are one of the most helpful aids I have seen. As with any book, there will be moments when the reader may query some propositions, but if you are keen enough to get into it, you will not be able to stay in the world of *ho hum*. It is a motivational, earnest, enquiring, very practical aid not just to prayer, but to a personal relationship with God.

This is not an academic book, which gives it the advantage of being readable for everyone. But that is not to say it isn't geared to make you think. Shane's style is what I call aggressive-friendly. He writes as a passionate friend, rather than a lecturer, or a spiritual bully. Working with him as a colleague through the Values For Life schools programme is a great advantage in recommending this book. Some gentler souls may feel he is *in yer face*, but for those of us who know him, we see, hear and read a passion, a care, thoroughness, zeal and a sharpness of mind that is fueled by the love of Christ, and by a corresponding passion to meet the needs of others. And by the way, he takes his own medicine too.

This book is worthy of a read by all who care about prayer. It is a book for all those who have never learned to pray,

for all those whose love for Christ is still alive . . . and for all those who can remember,
for those who would love to but don't know how to start,

for those who don't know why they should,
for those who (like me) are activists and can just so easily be too occupied with great things
and omit to pray,
for motorcyclists (again like me) who pray a lot on the run, and on the road, amidst distractions,
but need the discipline, the ordered holy place,
for those who wish they had some helpful methods and forms to monitor the prayer journey,
and for those who see prayer as a shopping list, and a daily chore, rather than a mutual
conversation between persons who love each other — Father, Jesus, the Spirit and you.
This is an engaging prayer primer, critically significant in a day of much prayer-less Christian
activism. Buy it, read it, and pass it on.

Rev. Dr K. 'John' Smith

Founder and International President of God's Squad Motorcycle Club

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Introduction

‘Praying! Yes, I love praying! It’s a highlight of my life. I really enjoy those few quiet moments between 7:00 and 7:05am when I ask God to bless my day and look after me. It gives such a great sense of, you know, well-being. It’s good to know the Big Guy is there. Yep, it’s the first thing I do most days.’

‘Praying? I’ll probably go to hell for saying this, but prayer is really hard work. I mean it’s um, it’s kind of, well you know, boring! Some days mind you, I have a nice sense of well-being when I pray, particularly when stuff happens, but just to sit down, open the Bible and pray. Can’t really get into it.’

‘You mean warfare! Yes indeedy, I get right into that, it’s a real blast! Nothing better than getting into one of those Holy Ghost jumping, screaming-at-demons meetings. If I had my way I’d be at one every night and make them compulsory for everyone. I come out feeling so pumped.’

Any of these sound familiar? I think I’ve probably been guilty of all three. So what about this ‘prayer thing’? What is it all about? Well, there are many perspectives on the subject and you may think that this is going to be just another one of those plead, beseech, command or demand to do, what we all know we should do, but struggle with.

Well I trust it isn’t. What I have found though is that people don’t actually struggle with the idea of prayer, particularly devotional prayer. If we actually did struggle, we would win. I think we get

conned. We only struggle with the idea of struggling in prayer and that, more often than not, is enough to dissuade us, in the midst of our busy worlds, from stepping into this marvellous time. Or maybe you are one of a growing group who hits the emergency shut-down button as soon as the struggle for a disciplined devotional prayer life begins to evoke unpleasant feelings. The sense of pressure or even pangs of guilt are automatically interpreted by this group as some throwback to 'legalist' dogma and they boldly assume this cannot be of God and excuse themselves from any further struggle . . . Whoops, been there done that!

I hope and pray that this excerpt from my journey in prayer will help you re-focus on this wonderful medium and get you past 'struggling with struggling' to find a new and wonderful world of devotional communion with our heavenly Father. Selah!!

One:

The Journey Begins

I remember when I was about twenty years of age having a persistent, growing thought that I needed to spend time developing my relationship with God. I was not a good church-attende and had only recently returned from wandering away from God, but I was in a great home fellowship group comprising of people who really loved Jesus. So these noble aspirations were goading me to some form of action, but what would that look like? For me it went something like this . . . if the initial sentiment was met by convenience, 'warm fuzzies' and the slightest hint of possibility in my social 'schedule', then the result was me sitting down and praying for a few moments and perhaps reading a verse of Scripture. However, most of the time it remained in the undemanding space of just another nice idea and the mere inclination toward prayer was enough to satisfy my immature and easily-distracted soul.

As time went by, this need to invest in intimacy with my heavenly Father progressed. I was living in a boarding house which was full of blokes living busy lives in a very transitory and hectic environment, not conducive to any semblance of privacy. At this time I had been in my first permanent job approximately eighteen months, and as I mentioned earlier, I had only been back following Jesus Christ about two years and although 'in love' with my Lord, I was not in any

meaningful fellowship with other believers.

The boarding house had been recommended to me by my old school friend Rob, who was a Christian. Rob was a shift worker; a working lifestyle I had not experienced up to that stage of my life and I always found him tired and I did not understand why this was until some years later. (Shift work is a 'tough gig' and as the doctor I consulted when I was doing shift work in later years told me, it's like being in a permanent state of 'jet lag' . . . and he was right!). Once I went into his room and found him on his knees against the bed, which was his usual posture in his regular practice of praying. I didn't notice for a moment though that this time Rob had fallen asleep with his head in his hands. When I realised he was out to it, I nudged him and said: 'Hey, bro you're sleeping'.

With a start his head shot up. Bleary-eyed and slurring he said 'No I'm not. I'm praying'. When I finally convinced him that he had fallen asleep, which didn't take much effort, he reluctantly conceded what he thought was a small failure. I found that a little odd and perhaps interpreted the failure as a sort of religious duty guilt trip. But I later realised it was something much deeper, not really an encumbrance, but the failure was in not wanting to waste this precious time with his Lord. Rob, without his knowledge was an example to me.

My boarding house buddy was actually seeking God or at least trying to. Was I? I guess inside I was fully confident of my 'special' connection with God which meant that words weren't really necessary to communicate with the Lord. I knew he was there for me and I, in my naive, complacent arrogance, was there for him! But was I?

Not many months later I attended one of my first 'serious' Pentecostal meetings. The church was in the Latrobe Valley and had an active congregation of about 250 people. Before the service they held a prayer meeting and boy, was it a noisy one. The room was packed, I mean jam-packed. Over half the church was there, or at least it seemed to be. The people were really energised; they were pacing and calling out their prayers at the top of their voices. I wasn't at all used to this and I couldn't even hear myself think let alone concentrate to pray. I remember feeling irritated

by this and started to switch off, but felt God prompt me and say, 'keep open here Shane, this is just a different culture to you, don't dismiss or lessen the power and validity of this just because you haven't experienced this before'. It was true — my culture was irritated, not God. I had at that point not experienced what is commonly called the 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit', so aspects of what I was experiencing were foreign to me, but that was soon to change.

Suffice to say it certainly was an interesting introduction to what were to become familiar and often dynamic scenes in my own life. We later went into the church service and I had a time of positive contemporary worship and sat under some good and significant ministry. As a result I have learnt the value of both stillness and fervent activity in prayer.

This particular meeting also included a commissioning service for a team of which I was a part, who were going out to plant a daughter church in the country town where I was living. At the end of the meeting, I was called out and received a prophecy from one of church leaders who had been ordained by this movement as a 'prophet'. Contained in the prophecy were some interesting projections about my calling and ministry which, though I protested much about, in time came to pass. The key requirement in the prophetic word was an instruction. This mandate (well that's how I received it) became a catalyst for what is now the foundation of my prayer life. The prophetic word stated 'I will give you the tongue of the learned and knowledge beyond your years, **IF YOU ABIDE IN MY WORD**'. As the scholars among you have already realised, this is an excerpt from the book of Isaiah.

I remember I was going through some very disquieting emotional turmoil at the time and despite my downcast state, this prophetic word really impacted on my spirit. It truly was, as time revealed, a word from God. This word gave further momentum to my previous inklings and beckoned me to become a more deliberate seeker of God. The quiet call was for me to know my God and my Saviour more intimately than I had known him before. As I continued to ponder this word and walk in a discipling relationship with my pastor Richard, it became clear that my prayer life could no longer be left in the category of convenience and sentiment. I had to be intentional

and deliberate about my devotional prayer life. So the question arose again — how do I do that?

There was only one criterion that seemed important and as time progressed, at least for me, it soon became clear why. My first priority became stillness and I knew I needed a quiet place without distractions. Obviously the boarding house where I was currently residing was out. So where would I go? I had been attending the local Baptist church for some months, when one evening the pastor indicated to the congregation that he was happy for people to use the sanctuary (the church building) when it was vacant. So I approached him and asked if I could avail myself of this opportunity. He was very accommodating and graciously showed me where the key was and gave me permission to use the church whenever I felt like it.

I remember pondering my approach to this new found opportunity. After much soul searching and patient deliberation that lasted all of three minutes, I determined that I would spend an hour a day in prayer. Surely that couldn't be too hard, especially for someone like me who really loves God. Right? Now about the same time, in the early eighties if I recall correctly, there was a course in prayer going around the churches, from which I gleaned some ideas. I was determined to make this happen. I had some ideas, now I had found a place to launch my new godly endeavour, and things were looking up. By the way I made all my decisions without consulting God. I decided that after meals on a week night, I would go to the church and between 7–8.00pm I would seek the Lord. How grand it felt to make that decision — how spiritual I was becoming!

The day of my first foray into deliberate personal prayer had arrived. Work had finished, I had eaten my evening meal and now, instead of sitting down to watch the television or go out, I was off to pray. Ah, but now the rubber, as they say, was about to hit the road. I still vividly recall the strong feelings of reluctance when the time came to go. I was not feeling well emotionally or spiritually. I was young, tired of concentrating at work, full of 'juice', and just wanting to meet with the lads or folk from the cell group. I was beginning to bump into some of the unpleasant nuances of my first deliberate attempt of habit changing and it wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I remember even having a nasty taste in my mouth. I thought to myself, do I really have to do this? Something

else was at work here too, but I wasn't that attuned yet to figure that out. All I knew was that this was important and I had made a planned decision and I was going to stick to it. So, armed with the church key, determination and my one-hour prayer outline, I went to the church.

I opened the door to the church sanctuary and for quite a while (well at least minutes anyway — a lifetime for a young man with things to do and places to go) I was in a strange awe. It reminded me of when I was 'saved' some ten years earlier, in a chapel in the mountains. I had rarely been in a church building without people or noise. Then I realised something — God was here, not in the building, but in the stillness. It was many years later on another such still and seeking moment, that God's intention became clear to me when I received this divine prompt.

I felt the Lord said: 'Shane I am often in my people's presence, but they are so rarely in mine'.

On this occasion I sensed God was present. Sometime later I experienced coming into his presence and that can only be described as 'other worldly'. Anyway I wasn't there to 'naval gaze' in that peaceful, God-focused environment, I was there to pray, that is to talk *at* God. So I got on with it and started to do only what I knew. I knelt at the altar rail and began to tell God how much I loved him. I then became distracted by my own thoughts, so started pacing and giving thanks, desperately searching for items to be thankful for. I was even speaking out loud to try to still those noisy thoughts of mine. All the time I had this innate sense not to pray about a lot of things. I had nothing really much to pray about, well that was my immature and myopic self assessment at the time. Anyway, after having fervently pursued God and proudly concluded that I had exhausted my prayer repertoire, I was fully convinced that at least an hour had passed. I looked at my watch and found I had been praying for only ten minutes. I was 'gob smacked'! How is it possible to pray for one hour?

Two: The Early Days: Running the Methods

What was I to do? My initial thought was that I would go back to what I was doing previously — which in essence was nothing! After all, this new approach wasn't 'producing' much. I felt uncomfortable, unnatural, and I concluded I was trying too hard! All these reactions carry a lot of weight especially when that seductive whisper breathes in your spiritual ear . . . 'Yes, that's right, let it go! This doesn't "feel" right. If it was God it would. God doesn't make demands of you, relax. He already knows what you need before you pray and loves you regardless . . .' Have you ever heard those whispers? If not, you will.

Now this was a decisive juncture in my walk with God. The question before me was this. Would I simply remain where I was, or would I pursue this relationship with the one who gave his life for me? I wasn't only rescued by Jesus once, but twice. I had walked away from God. I among all men owed God. If I loved him as much as I said then I must commit to knowing and communing with him.

I concluded that I could not go back. I must go forward. It would cost me time and effort, but the surpassing worth of knowing him was becoming my deeper motivation. I was not yet interested in his extensions (his resources) or intentions (plans and agendas), what he could do for me or what I could become in him. I was already sharing my faith. Sharing was purely a consequence of a real relationship with a real God. I didn't actively seek to serve God, but did so as a result of wanting to know him. Unbeknown to me — being with him rather than doing for him — was to become the benchmark and motivation for my Christian service.

So I had to revisit this 'hour of prayer'. Just what is involved? I began looking at systems, methods and ideas. One such system I bumped into whilst helping in the local Salvation Army was 'The Hour that Changed the World School of Prayer'. This system categorised prayer. If I remember correctly, it divided the hour into twelve five-minute sections. I attempted to fulfil the requirements and go through the actions but it didn't seem to fit my deep sense of what I should be doing. Please don't for a moment think less of this school, for to do so would be a travesty. It has many excellent principles and ideas that mobilised cities and denominations to pray. Some of the principles in this school of prayer were I believe a divine prompt to direct me toward the place he wanted me to go.

Around this time intercession or 'spiritual warfare' as it was also known, began to come to the fore again in the Body of Christ. It is interesting to note the emphases that God brings from time to time into the history of the Church. When we neglect or misappropriate some area of God's resources and arsenal, God has to address the issue with us. Invariably if we get it right, it has such an impact that we all leap on this new panacea for church ills. In time it just becomes one of the four 'F' words of Christianity — Fad, Flavour, Formula or Fashion. Despite the often well intentioned, but usually misguided actions of 'cause-hopping crusaders' there is always legitimacy in anything God re-emphasises.

The idea of praying for people, situations and events with a higher level of spiritual commitment and warfare, was being espoused in the church. With that came specific faith-filled prayer. One

of the strong emphases then was the necessity to be specific and clear about what you were praying for and determined, if not demanding, in your belief for its fulfilment. Suffice to say prayer lists became popular and important things. So I too had my lists. They began to quickly fill up my hour but somehow again this formula praying wasn't hitting the mark with me. It was by no means wrong and in fact was quite effective per se, but it just didn't 'click' in the context of relational communion with the triune God.

It was around this time that I felt strongly led to find a home of my own, a house or flat to rent away from the bustle of shared accommodation. Although I had moved from the boarding house into a single bedroom half-house, I was still in constant contact with the neighbours. I know now that it was God's leading to separate me and at the time I sensed I needed to be on my own. It was in this new, independent environment that my devotional life began to find a strong platform and take off. As my prayer times started to become not only longer, but with filled with greater expectation, I began simultaneously to have this longing for a 'noise free' mind.

I had up to this point in time been a bit of a 'music junky'. Before returning to the Lord I had accumulated quite a collection of secular music. But it wasn't this physical library that was the problem it was the mental 'juke box' of songs in my head that was creating the clatter and clamour. No, I didn't burn my albums, as was the fashion at the time! I still have many of them in fact (please pray for me). But what I needed to do, not for a religious reason, but a devotional one, was to get the clatter out of my mind and spirit, so I could be still and hear my heavenly Father's voice. I thought the answer was displacement, so to get rid of the secular music I would fill my mind with Christian music instead. Guess what? It worked — no longer did I have the latest 'pop' song involuntarily playing in my mind, but instead, Keith Green or choruses from church. I was free! Well at least I thought I was for a while.

Later I found instead of secular noise going on in my head, I had Christian noise distracting me from the stillness I so longed to find. One thing I quickly concluded, bright boy that I am, is that God wants us to be still and the Devil doesn't. Satan is happy to have any distraction to bump us

from communing more fully with God. So I embarked on a total brainwashing exercise.

Yes, that's right, brainwashing! You will be happy to know that there is a biblical precedent for this and it is found in Rom. 12:1-2 *'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.**'*

(I'm reminded of a quote by Barry Maguire, a 1960s doomsday rocker before he was saved. When an antagonist jibed him saying that all Christians are brainwashed, Barry replied 'Man everyone is brainwashed, Christians just get to choose who washes their brains'.)

Consequently I decided to exclude all music from my world for a season and seek God for a renewing of my mind. Even the clock radio was put onto 'buzz' instead of music because the song I woke up to would invariably plague me during the day. Within a short period of time it was no longer a problem, I could then hear or listen to music and not have it making noise in my mind. I was in control of the music, not it of me.

This change did not just happen mystically. I have to daily commit (there's that 'C' word) to seeking and knowing God. This was not done at me, for me or to me, but with my co-operation. Like any relationship, your walk with God requires two parties to build and work on it. It's not a special gift for special people. God wants you to know him and is waiting for you to seek and commune with him.

Months before I moved into my new two bedroom, fully furnished and totally independent prayer closet as I called it, I had received a divine prompt to write down my musings. In this quiet place these musings became more prolific. As well, I began to spend hours after work in an activity that I was soon to discover would be another vital key to devotional prayer — worship. I couldn't wait to get home sometimes to where I could pray, sing, read, sing, worship, sing in the Spirit and invest hours in just being with Jesus. I did not become monastic or reclusive. Incidentally, if self indulgent or self preserving isolationism happens, you are most likely falling in love more

with your devotional life than with Jesus. I had an active yet very closely monitored social life, by which I meant it was more planned than random and I didn't 'go out' all the time. I was serving in many areas within churches. (I have written more about this and other keys later on in the book.)



What you've read is some of my journey in discovering a rewarding, devotional prayer life. After I married many years ago, I consolidated my quiet time to early morning. For me, it is still the best time of the day — to sit down in a quiet corner and open the Word of God and commune with him. I endeavour to spend the first one to two hours of the day with my King, even though not always possible. In these times it is not so much requesting, or talking at God, rather taking the time to sit and listen, watch and wait on him. In the next chapters I share with you some of the philosophies and practice of what was to become my emerging devotional prayer life, so stay tuned.

Three: *The Language of Relationship*

The following has been somewhat of a Mission Statement for most of my discipleship life, and it is the echo of the cry of the heart that the psalmist uttered.

One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of his presence and inquire in his Temple' (Ps. 27:4). Accompanying the words of the psalmist are the following words of Jesus — words that don't merely assuage, they inspire and embolden me . . . 'Father, I thank you that you hear me. And I know that you always hear me . . . ' (Jn 11:41-42).

I have always been fascinated by the idea of praying at God. When I refer to that, I'm thinking of people I have met who have what seems to me, an amazing idea that they can get God to do what they want. Now I've been around long enough to have heard all the arguments about prayer moving the hand of God. I remain convinced along with C.S. Lewis that prayer doesn't change God — it changes us. I believe that our Creator and heavenly Father has a clear and unrelenting strategy. He is 'moving across the heavens' with his strategy and is waiting for us to connect with him and his purposes. It would appear for many that God is waiting for us to give him instructions about what to do next — as I said, fascinating concept.

This leads me to my first provocative proposition of this book, that of exploding a myth — the myth that . . . ‘there is power in prayer!’ I want to suggest here that in fact there is no power in prayer! Let me explain. I believe this evocative catch cry left to the interpretive discretion of the average ‘pew sitter’ has become a cliché. It is also just another example of our knack for inappropriate focus and a misunderstanding of what prayer is actually for. Whether inadvertently or not, prayer was never meant to be deified or even venerated. I understand that if we read scriptures such as James 5:16b ‘The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much’ and Matt. 7:7-11 ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you’, or recall the nagging woman in Luke 18:1-8, then prayer can quickly be perceived as the thing which moves God to do our bidding.

The following quote from one of the early church fathers is just one of a myriad of voices in a choir that appear to be promoting the idea that there is ‘power in prayer’ . . . or are they?

The potency of prayer hath subdued the strength of fire, it hath bridled the rage of lions, hushed anarchy to rest; extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the gates of heaven, assuaged diseases, repelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. Prayer is an all-sufficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine which is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by the clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings (John Chrysostom) (3).

Yet is it the *act* of ‘prayer’ that produces these results? What is John Chrysostom really saying? I don’t think Chrysostom along with the majority of us really believe that the *act* of prayer produces these results. There is a basic assumption we fail to notice in this statement, a ‘given’ that is often overlooked in a purely process based exercise. Although Chrysostom’s declaration surges with the energy of enthusiasm that can only be described as inspiring, it can also be used to perpetuate the myth that prayer ***in and of itself*** has power. Please notice the opening two words of this declaration of ‘the golden voice’ (as he was known) — ‘*The potency*’. In the Bible passages

above there is something behind the prayer, something that 'couches' it and gives it the force it appears to have. In James it was 'effective and fervent' in Matthew and Luke it was persistence, endurance and searching. So, from where does this potency, persistence and power come? What is it that gives this thing called 'prayer' such power? It is my contention that it is nothing other than faith and trust, and the revelation derived from a deepening intimacy with the triune God.

We must be careful when using phrases like 'power in prayer' because left unqualified these statements can easily contort prayer to become a mere 'mechanism' by which we exact from God what we believe is needed. If this sadly becomes our understanding of prayer, we can find ourselves in the disturbing place of a one dimensional 'how to' Christianity. Whilst our creator God is the author of all the 'how', he is even more the author of the 'why'. 'How to' Christianity and prayer left unbalanced inevitably pragmatises, domesticates and trivialises the Christian faith into mere workshop and resource for self actualisation. When we marginalise the 'why' we inadvertently marginalise the 'who' of our faith and the ultimate purpose of his incarnation. And what is the purpose of his incarnation? To my mind, foundationally it is reestablishing the fullness of the intimate relationship with the Trinity. This communion is key in transforming us to conform to the image of his Son, and the following of not only his pattern but more his life. To aim for less is to diminish heaven's intent and entertain the real risk of reducing our faith and prayer to merely 'maximizing materialism, momentum and ministry via magic'. Now whilst that may be an extreme, it is too often an inadvertent actuality resulting from an immersion in a productivity and performance driven Western culture. Relationship is either relegated or seen as a means to the end of maximising something else. This is not heaven's intent. The incarnation moved God's intervention in, and interaction with, humanity away from mere process, instruction and pattern (although important). Rather it moved it into a new phase, a phase of greater connection based on intimacy, accessibility and communion. As Judson Cornwall once declared . . . 'Jesus is God in available form, but God none the less!'

The parables of the lost coin and lost sheep particularly give us an insight into the intent of the

incarnation. Obviously the parables conote a sense of being lost. Now to the omniscient God who knows all and of whom the psalmist declares, 'is everywhere' the psalmist could possibly go, is not talking about location, nor even proximity, rather being 'lost' to the intimacy, the communion that had been lost in Eden..

In the entire history of mankind such a thing had never occurred. For four thousand years, God was God and man was man. Yes, man had something to do with God, and God sometimes made contact with man; yet the two remained separate. However, when Christ was (incarnated), a . . . wonderful event took place. A child was born, a child was called the Mighty God (Isaiah 9:6).

Christ's marvelous incarnation thus resulted in the union of God and man: God became one with man, and man became one with God

To our natural understanding, the notion of God mingling himself with man is inconceivable, yet this mysterious union was fully accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the incarnation of Christ also points to the nature of the relationship God desires to have with us. God wants to unite and mingle himself with the beings he created in his own image (Genesis 1:26). Eventually, through his complete salvation work, God will produce for himself a counterpart that matches himself absolutely in life, nature, mind, being, image, and glory, yet not in his incommunicable godhead (Lee: The Four Major Steps of Christ. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994).

Yet is this purely pragmatic form of prayer for productivity the single divine intent? Prayer is imperative, and can and should indeed be very powerful, but is it the focus of the prayer, or the act and intent that matters? Is there power in act of prayer or is the power in the proximity to the one we pray to? In this brief journey together I would like to suggest to you that prayer is something infinitely higher than mere process, or simple act . . . prayer I believe is the Language of Relationship.

I am sick of your sacrifices. Don't bring me any more of them. I don't want your fat rams;

I don't want to see the blood from your offerings. Who wants your sacrifices when you have no sorrow for your sins? The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils. Your holy celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath, and your special days for fasting — even your most pious meetings — are all frauds! I want nothing more to do with them. I hate them all; I can't stand the sight of them. From now on, when you pray with your hands stretched out to heaven, I won't look or listen. Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear, for your hands are those of murderers; they're covered with the blood of your innocent victims. Oh, wash yourselves! Be clean! Let me no longer see you doing all these wicked things; leave your evil ways. Learn to do good, to be fair and to help the poor, the fatherless and widows. Come, let's talk this over says the Lord; no matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool! If you will only let me help you, if you will only obey, then I will make you rich! But if you keep on turning your backs and refusing to listen to me, you will be killed by your enemies; I, the Lord, have spoken (Isa. 1:11-20 Living Bible).

This passage vividly illustrated that prayer and religious liturgy are very easy to enact. One can even do so with a degree of fervour as indicated by the dedication in keeping ceremonies, procedures and gatherings. Even the beseeching posture of raised hands exhibits a certain passion. The activity of 'prayer' wasn't the issue — there was no power in it. The people were in sin and although a huge problem, it was not fundamentally God's grievance. The real tragedy was that all these things precluded relationship, the very desire of God's heart. Even in the midst of the hypocritical lifestyle and the misappropriation of prayer and sin, God certainly asked the Jews to get their act together, but his real invitation was to invite them to 'come and reason with him'. God wants the people of Israel to sit still and enter into dialogue with him.

God wants to help, to be involved and commune with his people. I say again, there is no power in prayer, but there is tremendous power in an intimate and progressive relationship with our

heavenly Father.

It may help us to have a brief glimpse into some of the insights of the Apostle Paul. In Rom. 4:21 he cites Abraham and says of him '(Abraham) being fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to perform'. Being 'convinced of a promise' is not merely the result of some written text or even an epiphany. It is the outcome of an abiding sense of trust. Paul also makes one of those seemingly 'throw away' statements in his letter to the Ephesians. In Eph. 3:20 he declares 'Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us'. Again, these are superlative statements without caveat or equivocation. These aren't just the frenzied words or the demagoguery of religious fanatics with esoteric pipe dreams. No, these men had a good and developing intimacy with their God. Those kinds of 'trust' statements are the result of encounters with, not merely the power of God, but God himself.

Prayer is the primary interactive agency for the development of what is the paramount priority of heaven — relationship with his created ones — you and me. It is within, and only within, relationship that a verse like Jn 15:7 finds its appropriate context in relationship. 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you'. Hey! Let's look at this 'one-liner' from the Master himself. This is nothing short of remarkable! Understand, it's the author and perfecter of our faith speaking and he is giving you and me what would seem to be a 'blank cheque' to the divine resource account . . . 'Ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you'.

Not only do I get to put out my wish list, it's Jesus who is going to do it for me. I don't have to do anything. Bonus!

Reality check! For those of us who are getting a little carried away right now it is probably because our elation over the first part of the verse has dulled our sensitivity to the remaining requirements. This passage in John is one of those verses like James 4:7. People tend to quote only the half of the verse they like. 'Resist the Devil and he will flee from you'. Ah, but the first part

tells you that this will only work if you 'submit to God'! (Now we have the 'S' word.) The key here is not a formula or a liturgy, it is relationship. Jesus in this dissertation on relationship is saying: 'If you dwell and endure in not only relationship, but expectancy with me and my words, obey my counsel, mandates, precepts and instructions because you trust me, then and only then, will you be granted your desires, because guess what? They will be essentially in line with the will of God.' When you are in that place you are seriously and radically blessed! . . . And not because you get results in prayer either, it is because of the depth of intimacy you are experiencing.

It isn't prayer that produces the results, it is the intimate relationship of communion with the Father that brings about the divine response. Let us pursue this a little further to consolidate this thinking. When you have some time, look at what is traditionally called Jesus's high priestly prayer recorded in Jn 17. This prayer was not only for the disciples who were with him while he was on the earth but also for the ones who were to follow down through the ages — for you and me. Jesus asked his Father to grant that his followers would have as intimate a relationship with him and each other as Jesus had with his Father. Why? Verse 21 ' . . . that the world may believe. . . ' God wants the world to see, understand and ultimately know that intimacy with the Godhead

Again Jesus goes even further, not merely with a re-emphasis, but rather a whole new command in Jn 13:34-35 where the Master exhorts that . . . we love one another as Jesus has loved us (why?) that all may know that we are his disciples. It is relationship that creates the impact and gives prayer its perfect context and definition. (If you haven't picked it up yet, I'm really into this relationship with God thing.)

Four : So What Does Prayer Look Like?

From the outset of this section, I want to help us understand what prayer, whether it be public or private, shouldn't look like . . . Are you ready?

The following is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is an inventory of some archetypal culprits and as such you may have already encountered some of them — may be, heaven forbid, you yourself have been a perpetrator of such supplication felonys! I don't think there is any forgiveness for the ensuing sins. I am, as they say, winding you up of course! I think if we were honest with ourselves we would all be found guilty of some, if not all of them.

Prayer is not meant to be . . .

- 1) 'A hopeful handball' — prayer isn't: 'I'll punch this thing (prayer request) over my head into space and if there is a "full forward" in heaven he may or must kick a goal for me.'
- 2) 'Casual cathartic prayer' — this is the third person therapy process. It is the idea that just to allow you to get your pain verbalised and out of your system is help enough. I mean it's nice, but it isn't relating to God.

- 3) 'Spiritualising gossip' — where you expose someone else's faults or difficulties publicly in the guise of prayer. For example: 'Oh lord, please help Bill stop reading those pornographic books' or, 'God I know Mary can't help sleeping around. Please forgive her, etc.' I just have one question . . . who is this blessing?
- 4) 'Preaching with your eyes closed' — this has been a personal favourite of mine. It is standard fare for the frustrated preacher unable to find a pulpit. The following is an example . . . 'Oh Lord I thank you that your word says blah blah and we must follow this blah blah and if we don't you'll blah blah'. I think you get the gist.
- 5) 'Boasting via petition' — this thinly veiled attempt at 'fishing for compliments' is disturbing to say the least. It goes something like this . . . 'Father I thank you that you have revealed "so and so" to me and you have used me to do great work and I have done and you have made me so anointed, yadda yadda, rant, rave!'
- 6) 'A coin for the slot machine of blessing' — a Christian 'mantra' you chant to sanitise your own purposes. You rub the Holy Ghost lamp so you can get him to go through the hoops for your pleasure, gain or entertainment, then he is required to 'rubber-stamp' your agendas.

Well, having had a jovial glance at some of the negative practices on prayer, let us now turn to some thoughts about what I think prayer might be. The following list too is not exhaustive, however I encourage you to read each item and then pause and ponder — then add to them . . .

- a) Prayer is the communication that maintains the connection that is imperative for your relationship with our heavenly Father to flourish.
- b) Prayer is the agency that prevents the decay of intimacy.
- c) Prayer is the declaration of commitment to an open, willed communion with our heavenly Father that signifies not merely our need of him, but our desire to know him.
- d) Prayer enables God to work with us, not just on us.

- e) Prayer is designed primarily for relationship development. The extent of devotional prayer in one's life is an indication of the priority one places on relationship with God



As we continue I want to introduce you to some prayer 'categories'. For the purpose of this journey I want to open up three arenas for us to start investigating to help us to understand prayer a little better.

Arena One — Requesting Prayer

This is important. As seen previously in Mt. 7:7-11 Jesus insists we request and keep on asking and, as the passage indicates, primarily because God is good and wants to respond to requests. In this arena there are the following . . .

1) Intercession — as previously mentioned this is sometimes referred to as *warfare* because you tend to get into the thick of spiritual things when you intercede. In basic terms it is 'going into bat' for another person. 'Standing in the gap' as it is also called at other times which is interesting especially if the person you are praying for is not yet 'born again'. The Devil doesn't like his captives being tampered with and can pick a fight with you. This is why you need to know more about this before you jump in. Suffice to say that if you stay close to Jesus and to mature disciples of Christ you will be fine. (There are many books available on this subject but select wisely with your pastor's guidance.)

2) Supplication — this might seem very similar to intercession, but it has a different emphasis and purpose. It means to entreat, seek favour and grace more for self or situations to do with you. It is usually done as the result of a trial, trauma or difficulty that has happened or that is occurring. Good prayer isn't it? When in strife, we have THE best problem-solver in the universe on our side. So supplicate!

3) Petition — this is easy to define, the title gives it away. When you start a petition it is an organised activity carried out as part of a strategy and goal. You present an issue which you believe needs to be dealt with. It literally means (from a biblical perspective) ‘a solemn request — soberly considered’. As I said it is not usually conducted under duress, but as part of a plan to acquire, achieve or attain something in regard to Kingdom life and business.

4) Confession — what a healthy prayer and an hourly, if not daily one! It is frequently one of the first requesting prayers you present to God. When convicted of your sin by the Holy Spirit, you then confess to God that you have been wrong. To confess literally means ‘to agree’. You agree with God that he is holy and perfect. You are far from being perfect and need to be forgiven and cleansed of your guilt. It is good not to sin, but as you are learning and being empowered by God to overcome sin, confession is a very fundamental requesting prayer. Don’t stop telling God when you messed up. Don’t run from God when you have messed up, run straight to him. He already knows you have sinned and it is the safest place in the universe to be, at his ‘mercy seat’. 1 Jn 1:8-9 says we should ‘. . . confess our sins, (because) he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to (better still) cleanse us from all unrighteousness’.

Arena Two — Responsive Prayer

As my title suggests, this is about us responding to God. As God only and always does ‘good’ by his children then our responses are to that goodness. They are as follows.

1) Thanksgiving — this is probably the most self-explanatory of them all. Basically we tell God how much we appreciate what he has done and is doing for us. Ingratitude is one of the biggest inhibitors to prayer. Giving thanks always, even when you think there is nothing to be thankful for, does wonders for you and your attitude. In 1 Thess. 5:18 Paul says: ‘In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you’. Notice he didn’t say ‘give thanks **for** all things’ but give thanks **in** everything. You don’t have to say: ‘Thanks God for the car wreck’. Rather, Paul is saying: ‘Hey, give thanks that God is working his perfect plan despite the circumstances’. This

enables God to minister more completely not only to you, but more importantly, through you to others.

2) Praise — this type of prayer goes beyond our first step of thanksgiving. This act is more to do with the attributes of God. Praise is appreciation, but more so admiration. This prayer is directed to the character of God and the actions and decisions that arise because of his character. Here I am reminded of Ps. 100:4: 'Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise'. There appears to be a progression here. I step through, as it were, the 'gates of God's presence' with a thankful heart. Then I draw even nearer, 'into his courts with praise'. I wonder what would cause me to step into his throne room? Keep that in mind as we continue.

Arena Three — Receptive Prayer

If relationship is the priority of heaven, then communicative dialogue is going to be a vital key. Jesus said one of those seemingly 'obvious' statements recorded in Mt. 6:8: ' . . . your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask him'. Not only is it obvious, but it also seems a little redundant. Of course an omniscient (all knowing) God would know everything, wouldn't he? In the context of the Matthew 6 passage, Jesus is pointing to the fact that you shouldn't worry about many things because God knows about them already. But it is also a huge indicator to, I believe, something more important. If we are his children and God is our Father, then it is fair to surmise that he knows considerably more than we do. In contrast and by comparison, we know very little. Understanding this reality then it is essential to be aware that it is not so much what we say to God, but rather what we hear, that really matters.

Our senses tell us something about the priority of prayer. We have two nostrils, two ears, two eyes and only one mouth. In this context it would appear we are designed to receive twice as much data as we impart. Subsequently it is my contention that the most vital and pro-active aspects of prayer are WAITING, WATCHING, LISTENING and WORSHIP. Again please remember God knows what we need. He already has the perfect will for us so all he is looking for is a people who

want to commune with him and to whom he may disclose or impart that will.

The first element of receptive prayer we need to look at is waiting.

1) Waiting — In our microwave, instant, convenient and take-away society, waiting is almost never viewed as an asset, is rarely tolerated as appropriate, and is consistently seen as a liability. But it is the necessary requirement in order for us to drink in his presence and thence develop our relationship with God. To paraphrase Dr Judson Cornwall: God's presence is a radiating energy that can be absorbed. It is not fast acting. It takes quite a while to soak in. As priests were exposed to the presence of God for a week they were changed with the glory of his presence. The term 'Shekinah' is an extra-biblical term used to describe the glory that the presence of God manifests. It literally means 'God dwelling and remaining'. It is most definitely worth waiting for and is necessary if we are to come into the presence of God. As mentioned earlier, many years ago I remember a divine prompt when waiting on the Lord. The prompt was: 'I am often in my people's presence but they are so rarely in mine'. As I pondered this the Holy Spirit led me on a journey of discovery. Often we engage in 'activities' that can bring God into our presence, but rarely do we, in our manic culture avail ourselves of resources and opportunities, to come into his presence. (There is more about this later in the book.)

2) Watching and listening — remember I stated previously that we are designed to receive at least twice as much data as we give out. Watching and listening go hand in hand. It is in seeing and hearing that we receive most of the critical and complex information. God had a lot to say about these two activities, mostly when they weren't exercised properly. God in one of his many discipline sessions with his rebellious and recalcitrant children says through Isaiah that his people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive' (Isa. 6:9).

We all get hard of hearing particularly when we don't want to listen and that was the problem with children of Israel. The old adage states: 'There is none so deaf than he who does not want to hear'. But listening and watching (or failing to) go beyond a willingness or unwillingness to do so. The listening and watching God is really interested in the receptive prayer generated by a real

desire to seek him out.

As we are aware Jesus himself consistently spoke in parables. Matthew's gospel records that he never spoke to the crowds without using a parable (Mt. 13:34). Jesus also repeatedly said after certain dissertations: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!' I recall many years ago my nine-year-old daughter, who is an avid reader, asked me what that saying of Jesus actually meant. She had the impression that a lot of people in Palestine were 'earless'. When I explained that it is about listening with an open heart and mind in order to get the point, the penny dropped. She said: 'Oh I get it, the message is for those who want to listen'. That is exactly what our heavenly Father is looking for; people who want to listen. That's why he employed parables — they actually revealed who was paying attention.

Watching is much in the same vein. It is learning to see what God is showing, seeing things from his perspective instead of always seeing things through our own information filters, our own 'me coloured glasses'. I like Ps. 127:1, particularly the second part, as it is relevant to what we are considering here: 'Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain'. The key here is watching what God is guarding. To do that we need to know what our Master holds dear enough to invest in, what he has constructed that is so dear to his heart. Watching in prayer is about learning to discern not only the Master's voice, but his actions as well. In Ps. 123:2, the writer talks about the servants looking to the hands of their masters. In this biblical context the good servant is one who knows every gesture of his master. In ancient days a hand-clap or a finger gesture would be all that was necessary to see many things accomplished. It takes a great deal of time and an attentive eye to learn all these gestures but more importantly, to develop the kind of heart that desires to respond in such a willing and thorough manner.

Besides the awesome benefit of communing with God on such an intimate level, there is the added blessing of being totally fruitful and productive in the walk you have with your Lord and Master. He will always bring adjustment in these areas from which we can only ever benefit. Communing with God creates a matrix in which our receptivity is enhanced and the depth of

communion can increase too. When the previously mentioned areas are being adjusted, the environment for waiting, watching and listening are all improved.

However, it is what ensues that transcends mere practice and process. What then follows is abandonment to God — the preoccupation is now totally with him. Ah, but don't balk at this, this is not some obsession that leads to a dysfunctional monasticism, rather it ushers you into a new space that generates greater impact. To reiterate, so much of our worship in our 'selfist' Western first world seems to be for us and not him. We should instead become pre-occupied with his priorities, his personality, his process, his path, his presence, his place and his person. For worship to truly be worship it must be to him and for him. And if you haven't picked it up, I'll make it plain, in all I've written here worship cannot and must not be isolated solely in the well orchestrated consumer-focused and often entertainment-driven church 'sessions' — it finds expression in devotion to and for the King! When I am immersed in this place I become malleable in his hands. Subsequently my heavenly Father does not only speak to me with clarity, but he also knows that what he says will be received with the right heart and motivation and have the best opportunity to be acted upon his way.



The Enemies of Worship, the Enemies of Prayer, the Enemies of Relationship

Needless to say worship is so very important. Worship is a key, and therefore it is going to attract some negative attention and competition. From what I read in Scripture and hear in 'tradition' it becomes evident that the Devil wants worship as well. We read in Matthew's gospel chapter 4 the account of the Devil's temptation of Christ. I want to take particular note of the last temptation put to Jesus in this passage. Bear in mind that Jesus has been fasting for forty days and nights. He is overwhelmingly tired and fully aware of his ultimate destiny; the cross and all that it means. The Devil comes as he does at the most vulnerable times to our Lord.

When we read verse 8 the following really stands out . . . ‘Again, the Devil took him up on an exceedingly high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him: “All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me”. Then Jesus said to him: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only you shall serve.’”’

Christian tradition says that the Devil prior to his ejection from heaven, was an archangel who was in charge of worship in heaven. He was an angel of great beauty and stature and it would appear, influence, and it is held that because of this influence, focus and potential, he ultimately wanted to usurp the Christ as God’s Son, and consequently he was cast out of heaven. (An aside here . . . I think some current church practices which make ‘worship’ leaders and teams as central to church ‘ministry’ is of concern. I see the same ‘influence, leverage and profile’ that elevated the enemy of our souls to dangerous delusions being embraced with an often growing hubris . . . Worship, true and complete worship will not, in fact cannot produce this attitude, and begs the question, is this really worship?)

As indicated by his temptation of the Christ, the Devil actively seeks adoration from all. So the Devil seeks worship but there are not many who would admit to a direct adoration and pursuit of Satan in worship. So, if he can’t get worship freely, he will at least stop the created from worshipping God. How? I believe this is best accomplished by redirecting affections, by having focus, energies, resources and ultimately allegiance placed on something other than the one true God — the correct term for that is IDOLATRY!

The Prophet Ezekiel is used by God to directly challenge this aberration head on.

Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let myself be inquired of at all by them? Therefore speak to them, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes,

according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from me by their idols” (Ezek. 14:3-5).

‘So Shane, What is an idol?’ I’m glad you asked. It may be a statue or another God certainly, but we sophisticated Westerners have surpassed such primitive polytheism — only the base or grossly ignorant would engage in such practices. Well as much as that may be true in regard to the basic representation of idols, it is not true of the West, as we read on. Simply, an idol is anything that has a higher priority or value than God himself in your life. When people ‘relegate’ God they enter into worship of something, in fact of all sorts of things such as relationships, money, hobbies, sex, careers, the cosmos, nature, thought — the list goes on.

So what tactics could the enemy of our souls employ to prevent us from worshipping God? In Rom. 12:1 Paul begs and pleads with the Christians in Rome (and us) to present ourselves as ‘a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is (your) reasonable service’. The Greek word here for ‘service’ is *Lat-ri-ah* and it means to ‘pay homage to, an act of loyalty and reverence; to minister to, to worship’.

In my experience the first tactic the Devil tries is to prevent us from getting ON THE ALTAR. People who don’t know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord are not aware of their need to get on the altar. But when they are engaged by God, his word or his people to come to him, they must realise their desperate need of him and what is required to reconnect that communion with him. It is at this point that we really start our prayer and worship life together. If the altar represents worship in this context then to get on it, one must see and understand God’s requirements.

Worship is a heart attitude based on a revelation of not only what God has done for us, but much more on who he is. When we get even a partial revelation of the holiness, power and perfection of God, then we glimpse what great love, grace and compassion were exercised to allow us access, once again, to a relationship with God. We see how destitute and wretched we are. That revelation releases immense joy knowing that God was willing to reach that far for us. It produces contrition (brokenness) and repentance in our hearts and it elicits a response such

as: 'God I owe you, but even more, I can commune with you. I want to present my life as a living sacrifice'.



Cain's Error

When I talk of worship from a present-day perspective, I'm not merely referring to the various actions, liturgies, postures, or even antics, noises we may get up to in church services (although they may be part of it). No, it is the honour we bring, who we become and how we function in our relationship with him — that is worship.

I would like to look, in the book of 'origins', the book of Genesis, at an episode where the two named sons of Adam bring a sacrifice to God. To help us get some of the gravity of this event I want to paraphrase some of A.W. Tozer's thoughts (1).

Cain and Abel brought their sacrifices of worship to the Lord. We know for the biblical account that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable but Cain's was not. This assessment evoked a jealous rage in Cain and as a result he killed Abel. Cain's reaction was shocking and we may be tempted to look to God to shoulder some of the blame for Cain's actions. However, whilst God's assessment of Abel's seemingly hard work and sacrifice may appear to us a little unfair, we must be very careful to pause and really get a more complete understanding of worship, particularly in the context of relationship. Cain worked hard to produce a beautiful looking, smelling and tasting offering to God. But in all his self-efforts, he didn't really understand who God is and what God may have been requiring of Cain.

Cain didn't consider that sin was an issue to God from an eternal perspective. Nor did he consider that blood must be shed, for in the blood is the life. But more than that Cain needed to comprehend that worship of God is a total sacrifice, it is to be all and everything, not merely some of the good things we can do or produce.

Cain, it would appear by the outcomes that arose, came to this important requirement with and assumption. His assumption led him to believe he did not require an intermediary — a 'go between' if you like, that enabled him to not merely approach, but be accepted by God. When being made aware of this deficiency Cain became agitated and refused to accept the existing verdict that man had been alienated by God because of sin and that without an appropriate intermediary an acceptable connection couldn't happen.

In this agitated state, indicative of a 'I know better' attitude Cain made another tragic assumption and that was sin was less serious than it really is. Cain either did not realise or worse did not care that sin is what curses and impedes the communion that God so longs for us to have. And it is all that sin represents that God must address in a manner that can remove the impediment it places on the potential for communion — and this is no small thing. This appeasement is not trivial — as Cain was finding out — this mechanism for making things right has a theological term, and a very important one. That term is **propitiation**.

So for us to come to God through our own efforts for acceptance as Cain did, is to present ourselves in essence as 'filthy rags' to God in worship (Isa. 64:6). We need to understand as Abel did, that sin was the curse that broke the communion with God. For our sacrifice to be worthy of worship, it must be total. The only way for that to happen is through the forgiveness Jesus's blood brought for us at Calvary. To accept that intermediary we must fully realise our state and need for forgiveness and redemption before we can move onto the altar and be the living sacrifice we are not only called to be, but be totally fulfilled in.

Stopping us from getting on the altar is one way the enemy prevents us from worshipping God. Another way to prevent worship of God is to entice us to climb **off the 'altar'**. Most of the tactics the Devil uses in these scenarios are subtle and seductive, mostly because they seem so reasonable. In the past I have found myself on the metaphorical altar fully convinced I was fully committed to knowing and serving Jesus Christ. Then come the distractions and boy, have I been 'sucker punched'!

a) Needing a spouse — you are looking for, no, you must have a partner in life. After all, we convince ourselves marriage will broaden our ministry opportunities and we know it will fix the loneliness and lust problems we struggle with (couldn't we spend a year here?). This great-looking individual walks past your altar. Oh baby, this must be love and before you know it, you have crawled off the altar. Now before you become upset, let me say that having a partner in Christ is perfectly legitimate. I would like to suggest that God will bring a potential partner to your altar, not merely past it — and he most definitely will not bring an un-saved partner to your altar. Either way you must seriously scrutinise any relationship which gets you off the altar — avoid this, seriously avoid this!

b) Money/materialism — it goes something like this: 'What I will do is make a substantial amount of money to establish myself and my family first, that's being responsible. Then I will accumulate a lot of wealth so I can bless others and then go into ministry.' Now as reasonable as that sounds it is one of the most effective ways of disengaging you. Of course if it is a divine directive, then you will not have to get off the altar to do it and no worship is lost. However, in my experience and that of many others, I have observed it never seems to work that way. Before you know it, you are stuck in the cycle of bringing your lifestyle up to the level of your earnings so you never really have enough to give away. Either because of the busyness of wealth accumulation, you stop worshipping God actively. Or you are simply always too busy trying to make it, but never seem to get there. Either way you end up off the altar.

c) Fame/reputation — 'I'll climb off the altar and go — with God's help of course — and find fame and renown, because having that profile will give me not only access to, but influence with the elite of society so that I can minister Jesus to them. I'll have public accolades and gain leverage in society and people will listen to me because I'm famous and they will become Christians.' This 'altar-leaving exercise' always worries me. I don't know about you, but I can't think of many famous Christians from a worldly perspective, who are able to achieve public leverage with their witness. It seems if they come out in an overt fashion, it usually means a downturn in their popularity, not

an increase. Again, if God brings fame to your altar — great, it will have his desired impact — but if it is the kind of fame that gets you off the altar, the only impact that will have is negative.

d) Ministry — this is the scariest of the altar-exiting challenges, mostly because it is also the most plausible. I have even found myself getting off the altar to chase this one. Our calling initially excites us. Our new found gifts, fervour and involvement thrill us. Before too long these blessings lead to greater dreams and visions and the emerging ego. All this can cause us to see and know things, and with all that is happening 'for us' we think we understand what is best. This can inadvertently lead us in time to even presume and pre-empt God and what more noble reason for leaving the altar could there be than to pursue the service of the King? What I sometimes forget is that ministry is about him, not me. The only way this 'branch' can bear fruit of any eternal value, is when it remains in the vine. The best way to remain in the vine is to stay on the altar, which means remaining in intimately focused worship of him.

e) The fear of God's fire — this is probably the most 'tricky' one of all. Jesus said in Mk. 9:49, that . . . 'Everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt'. When we are committed to remaining on the altar then God will invest his salt and fire in us, so we can truly be the fruitful sacrifice he wants us to be. Have no illusions this can be a real ordeal at times. Not because it is painful in and of itself; it usually is so, because we resist it. The enemy can try to trick us into believing this dealing of God is a negative and not a positive thing. He can lead us to believe, especially when it appears extremely painful and overpowering, that we may be in the wrong place instead of the right place, after all, if its God, why does it hurt? So in our pain we find fear and in fear we find doubt and then we look for options and the first option is to get off the altar. (God may hurt you, but will never ever harm you.)

We have only looked briefly at the subject of worship, but when we understand it in its entirety it is one of the greatest assets in developing our communion with, and receptivity to, our wonderful heavenly Father. Another powerful factor in developing receptivity to the Lord is a spiritual and ghastly discipline called . . . fasting!



Prayer and Fasting

Fasting! I don't know about you, but the very mention of it makes me instantly associate it with other processes like tooth extraction, changing a tyre, shopping for a new dress with my wife and other similar 'fun' pursuits.

In my early years of Christian leadership, I remember hearing of a since-departed senior minister of the Pentecostal movement who believed strongly in the words of Jesus when he declared to John's disciples: 'Why fast when the bridegroom (Jesus) is with you'. As far as he was concerned Jesus was always with him and therefore fasting was obsolete. Even though that was said tongue-in-cheek, I am happy to subscribe to such a school of thought, aren't you? (I'll burn for that.)

I spent a number of years in a church community as a youth minister and evangelist and for approximately five years I fasted almost every Sunday. How noble! How spiritual! How self-sacrificing! I would like to think so but in reality it was purely an act of convenience. I had developed such stress about church (particularly Sundays, I won't elaborate) that I could not eat anyway. My attitude and state of heart were far removed from Godly purposes and intent that the process was for the most part, a fruitless exercise. What a wonderful veneer to conceal a carnal and corrupt heart to masquerade behind?

So what is the point? There is nothing wrong or deficient with fasting but as with all prayer, it is all to do with motivation, intent and attitude. If I remember correctly, around 1989 whilst waiting on the Lord in my 'prayer closet' (that's an old school term, I'm showing my age), the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah came alive to me in a new way. The big question God asked in verse 5 particularly caught my attention. In our terms God is saying: 'Who do you think you are blessing? Do you think I enjoy seeing your self-denial routine? Torturing yourselves is not impressing me at all.' Then our heavenly Father goes on to tell us through Isaiah the prophet what kind of fast pleases God. The fast he desires goes something like this.

'Loose the bonds of wickedness' (stop exploitation).

'Undo the heavy burdens' (ungodly and unreasonable expectations).

'Let the oppressed go free and break every yoke' (liberate the crushed and burdened).

'Share your bread with the hungry' (don't starve yourself or give hand outs. No! Bring the hungry into your home and give them from your table).

'Bring into your house the poor who are cast out.'

'Cover the naked' (give clothes to those you know who are without and don't neglect your relatives).

'Take away the yoke from your midst' (stop oppressing the weak).

'The pointing of the finger' (cease making false accusations).

'Speaking of wickedness' (stop spreading rumours and gossiping).

'Satisfy the afflicted soul' (rehabilitate those broken by life and circumstances and who want change).

It is interesting to note here that this inventory of priorities in God's version of fasting was pointed out by Jesus himself.

Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his demons! For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me, I was thirsty, and you didn't give me anything to drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me no clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.' Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?' And he will answer, 'I assure you, when you refused to help the

least of these my brothers and sisters you were refusing to help me' (Mt. 25: 37-45, NLT).

I think the point God is trying to make is that if you've done these things as part of your 'reasonable spiritual service' — in other words, worship, then a further fast of self-denial may take you to an even deeper level of intimacy with him and a greater release of resources to you and through you. It is the pursuit of God and the desire to serve him that will lead you to do these things, which in turn will bring the power and manifestation of God's glory. His glory will be of far greater benefit to man and heaven than starving yourselves.

But it doesn't end there. God through Isaiah goes on to promise the consequences of such a fast. In verse 8 the prophet writes the following.

'Your light shall break forth like the morning' (the light of God will overcome the darkness, not only in your heart but in your circumstances).

'Your healing shall spring forth speedily' (you'll be blessed; implying a healthy spirit and body).

'Your righteousness shall go before you' (I will view you through this act).

'The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard' (God will watch your back door. So you can advance without having to watch your back).

Verse 9 . . .

'You shall call, and the Lord will answer' (God will hear your prayers. This is what we try to achieve through fasting anyway).

'You shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am' .

Verse 11 . . .

'The Lord will guide you continually' (you won't get lost or really wonder where to go next).

'And satisfy your soul in drought' (even when things around you are dry and desolate your land will be watered).

'You shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. (you will be resourced to sustain a vital life).

Verse 12 . . .

‘Those from among you shall build the old waste places’ (even what is considered unsalvageable will be renewed by you).

‘You shall raise up the foundations of many generations’ (you will set up a strong footing for your descendants).

‘You shall be called the Repairer of the Breach’ (you will bring people back to God).

‘The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In’ (you will create safe places to live).

(Note that verse 12 traditionally speaks of the Christ. But I think as his representatives and ambassadors we fulfil a type of that mandate. ‘Greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father’ (Jn 14:12).

Now in presenting this information to you in such a way, am I suggesting we shouldn’t fast in the customary way? Of course not! What I do want to do is stimulate you to think more about lifestyle prayer, rather than formula-based or liturgical prayer. Remember as the Letter of James so rightly points out it is the ‘doers of the word, and not hearers only who will be blessed’ (Jas 1:21,25). Worship is hearing and doing and in its ultimate intent, it is knowing God more.

This kind of fasting has proved in my life the truth of much of what Isaiah declared. There are scores of books on fasting. What I want to submit in this book is a different perspective to provoke your thinking.



Heavenly Language

Now for those who may not have experienced what is commonly called ‘the Baptism in the Holy Spirit’, I don’t want this short passage to dissuade you from further reading. I want to give space to looking at tongues as an aid to receptive prayer. There are commonly considered three major uses of the heavenly language.

- a) Intercession; praying for another person by allowing the Holy Spirit to pray through you,
- b) self-edification, and
- c) exaltation and worship of God.

To be completely honest with you it has been my 'heavenly language' that has sustained me in prayer when I would have previously ceased. It is not just the mumbling of syllables or noises — it is in engaging of the LANGUAGE of this tongue that I find myself connecting — I can much more easily spend 45 minutes in constant utterances in my tongue than I can in English. This is by no means a 'be all or end all' as some have espoused. It is just another tool or weapon that can assist you in pressing through in prayer.

In conclusion, it is my contention that receptive prayer is what seems to be lacking in most devotional and corporate prayer. It is the cultivation of such prayer in our lives and churches that will bring a greater transformation of lives and subsequently our ministries, particularly to the lost, to the communion our Father longs for, as well as a greater effectiveness in ministry to our fellow disciples.

Five :

Developing a Devotional Lifestyle Through Consecration

I want to investigate in this chapter what I call consecration. This voluntary state of consecration, though replete in the biblical record, is one which Scripture does not demand we participate in. Nevertheless, the prompts and examples do indicate that without consecration, your intimacy with and effectiveness for God will be limited. Please remember this is not about performance or point scoring, but it is all about a desire to encounter and engage with God more.

If you recall earlier in our journey, I shared a Scripture that became the basis of nearly all that I do. It was Ps. 27:4: 'One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple'. I wonder if this passionate desire, this yearning to abide with God influenced David so much that it influenced him to place Zadok as priest — or could it have been that Zadok impacted the life of David? Of course I am only speculating. One thing to note is that you don't hear as much about Zadok as you do Abiathar, but may I suggest that it was Zadok's priestly focus that

was a major key to influencing David's priorities and ultimately gave birth to the Zadok priesthood itself. It was the young priest Zadok, who left with David to go to Ziklag and the first priest to acknowledge God's anointing on David. This young man was not only discerning but incredibly honourable, even as his name declares . . . 'one who has proved righteous'. What emerged from this partnership, was not a system, methodology or even line of title, rather a posture, a focus and intent that facilitated a manner of interaction and service that was more about ministering to and intimacy with God and not just for the people.

In Ezek. 44:15-19 you will find something interesting. Notice the opening verse: 'But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, who kept charge of MY SANCTUARY when the children of Israel went astray from me . . . ' What a remarkable endorsement, what a powerful mark to make! It would appear that when everyone else had forsaken God and his house and his purposes, these priests continued to minister to and for God. They were set apart. Verse 15 continues: ' . . . they shall come near me to minister to me; and they shall stand before me to offer to me the fat and the blood . . . ' What a privilege! Not only do they stand in the presence of the Lord, but they minister to him, the one who needs no ministry. What I think is really being communicated here is that God, the holy and transcendent one doesn't merely allow these servants in his presence to perform, rather he desires them (and us) there to fellowship with him.

Another interesting thing to note is the reference to the linen garments in verse 17. When the priests entered the sanctuary they must not be wearing anything which causes perspiration. God is inferring: 'When you come into my presence I don't want this to be a "work" exercise. You don't have to strive in this place, this time is for ministry **to me, not for me**'. In my mind this passage speaks strongly to devotional and relational prayer. Ezekiel goes on to speak of the shedding of the linen when they leave God's presence and dressing instead, in wool. One very important property of wool particularly in an era with limited 'textiles' is that it insulates, and insulates very well. It keeps the warmth in and cold out. To me it is as if God is saying when you leave my presence to minister **for me** then you need to clad yourselves with that which protects

and maintains that which you have **drawn from** me.

We must be careful in serving God so that our service does not dominate our prayer life. Separate your relational and ministry prayer life so you can truly develop intimacy with God. If you do, ultimately you will achieve the effectiveness you need not only to sustain yourself and your calling, but to grow. I have heard of too many people who are actively involved in service (and we all should be) who become caught in communicating with God too much about need and task, rather than communing with God about him and his purposes.

Interesting digression; I think David and Zadok were men similar to Moses and Joshua. They were men who understood the difference between anointing for service and presence for communion.

As mentioned earlier, one of the concerns for the post-modern church is that Jesus is in our presence, but we are so rarely in his. That is why it is vital to distinguish between the anointing of the Holy Ghost and the presence of Jesus. From my understanding of Scripture the 'anointing' is a product and extension of God. It is a sweet-smelling fragrance and endowing, a smearing with the power and provision of God. It is also for the purpose of setting one apart. It is the separation for a specific reason for something greater, higher — in fact it is to whom, not what!

What I understand is that the presence of God is a direct encounter and contact with Christ himself, not merely the extension or evidence of God, which can often be referred to as the 'anointing'. Under the 'anointing' there is no doubt that you can be challenged, touched, renewed, healed, delivered, even prepared and empowered, as Isaiah 10:27 indicates: 'The yoke will be destroyed because of the anointing oil'. However these, at least to me, signify a greater purpose. They signify a preparation, a preparation to actually bring us into his presence where you can be **transformed to conform to the image of his Son**.

One reality I have discovered is that the good can touch you without you touching it. I liken it to a public encounter with royalty — say Queen Elizabeth II for example. Now it may be appropriate to scream, yell and wave with excitement and even joy as her cavalcade goes by. But it is a

completely different dynamic, purpose and consequence when you are invited into her throne room. In the crowd she may have connected with you in her appreciation of your cheers by a smile and a wave, but now in the throne room she will most likely touch you by hand-shake or gesture and speak with you. In this environment, your posture, process and priorities all shift.

In the Gospel of Mark 5:21-34, we read the story of the woman with the issue of blood. The account takes place in the midst of a thronging crowd. Now it is very important to picture this scenario. The word throng conjures a chaotic and intense imagery, if you've ever seen a Middle Eastern funeral procession on television you will understand, it is 'wall to wall' people. This of course means that Jesus was jostled by the huge numbers and movement of people. To use the phraseology I have been using it is obvious that Jesus was most definitely in *their* presence, but there was only one woman who came into *his* presence. Of all those adoring, pursuing or even spectating crowds, not one actually connected with the Master. This woman however did touch the King and as a result was restored. Her body was totally healed. More than that, Jesus noticed this 'touch'. It was a 'remarkable' experience for him, as a touch today still is.

Those who truly seek to come into God's presence will touch the Divine in such a way that heaven may 'stop' for a moment. Well it is a thought to ponder, isn't it?



Moses, Joshua and The Tabernacle of Meeting

Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of Meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people got to their feet and each man stood at this tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the Tabernacle that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door

of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshipped, each man in his tent door. So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle (Exod. 33:7-11).

Such a small passage, almost incidental, a casual matter of fact, but it would do us well to pause and give greater consideration to this record. This passage of Scripture is, in my opinion, a key point of 'transition'. Moses is moving into a completely new echelon of communion with his God. Until now Moses had been a messenger, a leader, an agent of rescue, a mediator, a shepherd and teacher, but **now** he is becoming not merely a servant of God — rather a friend.

Moses actually takes his tent and pitches it outside the camp, apart from the people. In fact verse 7 emphasises that it was 'far' from the camp. This speaks of a very deliberate and concerted separation and isolation, a chance to be away from all that could so readily occupy his time, thought and emotion. It is out here that Moses can connect in a 'non-task' oriented way with his Father God. It is also interesting to note verse 9: the 'pillar of cloud' — the symbol of God's presence with the Jews, wasn't 'out there' somewhere, it was now in front of Moses's tent. Here we have a man totally yielded to God, humble in service and totally separated unto him. God has now decided to present himself to a man.

We see in this passage too, a single reference to Joshua and a seemingly incidental one at that, so brief is the mention that one could dismiss it as merely a remark. It is recorded in verse 11 that after Moses departed the tabernacle of meeting to return to the camp, Joshua would remain in the presence. I believe it is this single verse that gives us one of the greatest insights into the way Joshua was wired and the priorities he had set and in my opinion, is a significant indicator as to why God selected him, above all others, to lead Israel after Moses departed. Joshua wanted to be with God. He wanted to invest in God's presence. He wasn't merely satisfied with God being in his presence, he wanted what Moses had; NOT the position, power, purpose, possibility or even

the promise. He wanted the presence: the presence that enabled face to face communion with his great God.

Here is a side-thought to ponder. Is the 'Joshua Generation' we hear so much about, really concerned with conquering and occupying in courage, or is it much more to do with what I have just written here? Is it the task and focus that make a great leader or is it faith, obedience and courage that determine that? Or are these attributes merely the result of the priority made of total yieldedness and the highest priority of all being a progressively deepening intimacy in the presence of God?

If you continue to read Exodus 34 you see what happened when God allowed Moses to see him and most of his glory. It was after this that the children of Israel could literally not look on Moses because of the reflective glory of God's presence. Remember Exodus 3, when God came into Moses's presence — the bush was ablaze yet not consumed — now Moses has come into God's presence and the difference is almost immeasurable. Moses is now 'ablaze' with the glory of God.

So what has all this to do with you and me? You may well ask. Are we Moses or do we have even the potential for such communion? We may not commune in the manner that Moses did, yet we can, in a maybe different and I believe better way. Have a read of 2 Cor. 3:1-18. Are we likely to find ourselves in such a demanding pseudo messianic role? Maybe not, but as ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20) we are conveyors of the New Covenant. Anyway, the real point as indicated earlier is that intimacy and communion didn't really revolve around Moses's task, role, function or performance. It appeared, well at least to me, to have much more to do with Moses's consecration and humble pursuit of intimacy with his Father and his God. Out of that issued the accomplishment of great things, the dispensing of great wisdom and the capacity to be a great leader. It would do us well to seek the same heart and allow God to draw us closer to himself. As you draw near, allow him to transform you to conform to the image of his son. It is in this place that we truly become ministers **to** God and **of** God. Selah!

Six:

What Is Your Strategy?

Aha! Got ya! Well I might have if you were one of those people who gets toward the end of a book and thinks: ‘There were some interesting points in that . . . where’s my next book?’ If you were one of them, I did get you, because we have not finished yet!

If we believe the purpose of Christ’s appearing was to bring man back into relationship, real communion with God, then the language that is the life-line of that relationship is prayer. If you are like me, and you may be, then you know that you will get all inspired by good prompts and ideas and even resolve to step into a new and improved prayer life. But a ‘gazillion’ things seem to swamp you, or you actually start but for a whole bunch of often indiscernible reasons you go back to your old pattern of no deliberate quiet time and/or hit-and-miss devotions.

At the risk of being to ‘in your face’, we cannot, we must not simply excuse away our lack of devotional intimacy and prayer. We must not yield to passive notions which generate inertia. Neither must we ‘wish’ things were different. We, fellow followers of Christ, must act and act with intent.

Affirmative Action — Designing your Devotional Strategy

So where are you up to in this? You may have no devotional prayer life at all. Do you have a hit-and-miss one? Do you have a regular time set aside? The real question is, are you from wherever you are now, willing to expand that practice? Are you hearing the Spirit of God clearly? Is there a growing revelation of who God is and what he is wanting in your devotional journey? Are you becoming more like Jesus as you spend time with him? About ninety percent of us will truthfully answer something between 'I'm trying to' and 'What weird sect are you from?' Either way we know that in order to know a life-changing relationship with God, we have to go to the next level in our devotional world.

Key One — Aspiration

I want to encourage you to foster aspiration in your devotional life. In a world which promotes goals, targets, productivity and achievement, our prayer life can get swamped by other more tangible demands or aspirations. You may have either an inkling of desire or a pang of disquiet. Don't dismiss them or let fear of 'guilt' to drive your response, instead cultivate these inklings. On the other hand you may have no such prompt at all, which for me is always a concerning trend. Regardless of where you are, the first thing I would like you to do is, everyday ask God to work on your aspiration. Pray that our heavenly Father by his Holy Spirit will motivate you more. Ask him to stir your heart, even make you uncomfortable. But wait there's more, that is only the first step. Don't stop there, because as a 'stand alone' step, it will not work. You have to follow the next step to not only develop your strategy, but stop you from becoming bogged down in a potential 'pressure' zone.

Agenda

Now most of this isn't new to you, but what we all have to realise from the outset is that there are no magic formulas or quick fixes in this most precious arena, despite the claims of the very

few who may have had some visitation. But that probably hasn't happened to you, nor has it happened to me. Certainly the enemy of your soul doesn't want you praying and he wants to shut this down by all means possible. However, we are not going to be those who self-sabotage or aid the Devil in his plan, we are going to step forward — we will not be foiled!

The first thing to do at this point is get a journal and write down what you are going to do that is different from what you are doing now! An agenda is a 'list of things to be attended to'. In this instance it is noting what is going to be addressed. My grandmother had a little hand-written reminder note on her wall, like the many great spiritual prompts around her lounge. This particular one said: 'Seven days without prayer makes one weak!' In my years as a disciple of Christ I have found that spiritual 'strong men' exist because weak Christians do. Jesus said that in order to plunder a man's house, you must first bind him, but if someone stronger comes along, what he has will be forfeited to the combatant. If we neglect prayer and its items, then we will not fully discover the intimacy with Christ which leads us to the following . . .

Prayer reveals not only what Jesus has accomplished, but much more extensively who and how he is.

Prayer enables us to understand who we are in him. ' . . . They who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.' (Dan. 11:32).

In prayer we learn what he wants us to do and how, so we don't waste time and energy on things God isn't involved with (Jn 14:5, Ps. 127:1, 1 Cor. 3:3-8).

Prayer reveals to us what the enemy may be doing and how best to defeat him.

A prayer list is an agenda prompt.

Having a list isn't everything, however, it is a tool to help to retrain your focus, to enable you to become more deliberate in how you approach God and connect with him, particularly when it comes to petition and supplication.

Please remember you will not jump into all I've shared here in a couple of weeks. It takes time to learn, then to retain in a natural way, then to explore the depths within each category and type.

Write down your needs, prayer requests and time assigned, particularly to receptive prayer.

Our next step is — action, the when, where and how.

You have your endeavour. You have your list. Now you need to **act!**

When?

What's the best time for you to set aside what I call 'alone time' for devotional prayer? Remember you need to work on minimising, if not removing the things that deter or distract you. It can help to inventory here (or in your journal) what distracts you and then in prayer write down what you may do to avoid or minimise that impact.

Distractions

The way to minimise them

Having completed this part of the process will obviously influence the 'where' you decide to have your devotional time.

Where?

Again, keep in mind you are setting yourself up to triumph, so you will learn, grow and in the process, become more adaptable. In the meantime find a place that is consistently available. For example, don't pick a time at the church every night or every second night when the church has a myriad of programs coming and going. This will inhibit you from concentrating when praying or you will postpone your prayer time due to lack of access. A task deferred is often a task forgotten. In my experience you will think to yourself: 'I'll let it go for a week and when next week comes, I'll get into it'. But next week comes and your struggle to re-engage and your intention are even more

difficult. The law of diminishing intent begins to work. When you are starting out or going to the next level, you will have to ensure you minimise possibilities of interference as much as you can.

Many people combine walking and praying so that as they say, they 'kill two birds with one stone' — exercise and devotional praying. That's not a bad idea but it's hard to read the Bible when you're walking, isn't it? So you can purchase the Bible on MP3 and still 'get the Word into you'. However, if I were 'studying' the Bible, say for a course, then I know I wouldn't relegate that process to a 'head phone' exercise, I'd actually set up a separate time to study. So, why wouldn't I do that with contemplative reading of the word? I remember the great philosopher Blaise Pascal once declared ' . . . A man (or woman) is not reading the Word of God until they are alone with the Word of God!' In short it requires closer attention.

The point is to ensure that your physical setting for yourself to commune with God is the best possible one for transformation and growth.

How?

This is influenced to some extent by where and when. But the key here is to remember the three arena's of prayer we have looked at.

Requesting prayer — intercession, supplication and petition.

Responding prayer — thanksgiving and praise.

Receptive prayer — waiting, watching, listening and worship.

It is important to include all these aspects in your prayer life when beginning write down your agenda and what type or arena of prayer you are going to proceed to. To start of allocate a time limit (if you need to) of two to five minutes to each area. As you grow in these areas, they will become more natural and flowing. If you find yourself really getting absorbed in an arena of prayer at any time, keep going — follow it and exhaust it! Don't worry if you miss the other sections of your agenda because generally you are following a divine prompt or a need. Either way God is working with you.

The Strategy to Engage

Days of the week I am currently setting aside for my devotional life

Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.

Days of the week I intend to set aside for my devotional life for the next four to six weeks

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Location I intend to pray in

The time and duration on these days I am going to schedule for devotions over four to six weeks

Time of day

Duration

How long am I going to pray? Time allocated to

Requesting prayer Current

New

Responding prayer Current

New

Receptive Prayer

Spend a lot of time here cultivating your listening, watching and waiting — it will help you prioritise, adjust and sometimes cull much in your requesting prayer.

Current

New

My prayer list in requesting prayer

People (family, work mates, friends, Church, pastor etc.)

Situations

Needs

Service/vision development

Accountability

Now we introduce an important dynamic to this journey — a coach! Of course this means accountability. In a culture governed by individualist ideologies, accountability to someone else can seem such an ugly thing, but don't be duped, this is a Kingdom principle not to be ignored. One of the great things that I love about the Christian walk is that we do not have to do it alone. As I have stated innumerable times, following Jesus is designed to be carried out in community and particularly through discipleship. Christianity is learned and therefore taught. The Jews knew this principle all too well as both the following Scriptures reveal.

These are all the commands, laws, and regulations that the Lord your God told me to teach you so you may obey them in the land you are about to enter and occupy, [2] and so you and your children and grandchildren might fear the Lord your God as long as you live. If you obey all his laws and commands, you will enjoy a long life. [3] Listen closely, Israel, to everything I say. Be careful to obey. Then all will go well with you, and you will have many children in the land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

[4] Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. [5] And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. [6] And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands I am giving you today. [7] Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are away on a journey, when you are lying down and when you are getting up again. [8] Tie them to your hands as a reminder, and wear them on your forehead. [9] Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:1-9 NLT) Also read Ps. 78:5-8.

These are good models to emulate as you seek how to find additional ways to pass on such essential, in fact imperative information, in making disciples through gospel of the Kingdom. More importantly the author and finisher of our faith Jesus Christ said in Mt. 11:28-30 that we are to come to him with our burdens and unload them and (more importantly) take his yoke upon our

shoulders and learn from him. See, it is not what you put down that is of greatest importance it is really what you take up that counts. The paramount importance in disciple-making is helping people draw near to and connect with Jesus. This can't be done for us, but we need help in doing it.

When you set out your aspiration and agenda, tell your disciple-maker/mentor what you are doing and ask him or her to pray for your endeavour, encourage and cover you, but most crucially, hold you accountable in your action plan. Give your mentor permission to check and challenge you. If it gets tough, ask him/her to meet, and pray with you in the initial stages.



Trouble Shooting

The Apostle Peter said the Devil is like a roaring lion prowling around seeking who he might tear to bits. That is just the Devil's style, now what we are going to do here is some 'hunting' of our own as the title 'trouble shooting' suggests. Let's look at some scenarios which are common to most of us and look at some suggestions as to how we may handle them.

Scenario One

'Shane I sit to pray and find my mind wandering into everything from the latest song, to what I need to do today; from day dreaming, to stuff that is stressing me out to . . . Before I know it, the time I set aside to sit with the Lord is gone with just "thinking stuff". It's like I might as well have not bothered.'

As I alluded to earlier, you will encounter this especially as you begin. Don't worry, the first thing to remind yourself, is that God knows what's going on and he can handle the wandering mind. Ask him to help you connect and commune with him and make that your prayer even if it sounds somewhat mechanical.

Use your list to help you focus.

Pray out loud. Be deliberate about engaging your mind and mouth.

If you have a 'spiritual language', deliberately speak it, don't just mutter and mumble.

Sometimes movement like pacing can help.

If concentration is difficult, then open the Word again and read. If you wander when reading, then ask yourself what the passage is saying and write down the key points as you see them.

'Wandering' when reading the Scriptures at times can actually be a God-inspired thing since our ultimate aim is to develop an open, natural communion with him, so pursue the meander and see where it leads. While still learning, I encourage you to ponder, ruminate, kick ideas around in your head and heart and verbalise your questions to God. For example, 'Father where am I going here? What are you saying in this? Sometimes it will be just a day-dream, but more often it is an idea, concept, direction or conviction God desires to tease out of you or for you. God will give the inspiration, revelation and illumination if you give him a submitted heart and a willing mind.

Scenario Two

'I feel guilty about the absence of a devotional life or its haphazard nature. Even if I do get going praying, it never lasts.'

One of the keys here is 'intent'. It may sound like a play on words, but rather than set apart time for devotion — set yourself aside to God. Do not focus on the activity — instead focus on consecrating your life. When you set yourself apart to God, not just from 'bad', then tasks or processes are seen differently — not a thing to done, rather and opportunity to draw near, therefore the step into a quiet time is so much easier.

Another way of looking at it is like the difference between seeking forgiveness and seeking repentance. When you come to God to ask forgiveness for a mistake or sin then you receive it and continue on. But if you go to God seeking repentance you are going beyond requesting forgiveness for an error, you are rather seeking for a change of state or lifestyle. You are asking God to do a bigger work in you and then the forgiveness has a far greater impact. Consequently

you will need forgiveness less often because of your new state of heart. When you consecrate your life to God, the idea and motivation to commit to investment in a devotional life is far easier. So many people try to shift their heart towards devotions on a routine, daily basis rather than pointing their life to Christ. The latter will mean your devotional life will be a consequence of your focus, rather than something that tries to generate a focus.

Scenario Three

'I am trying to be fervent in prayer, but I keep looking at my watch to see if I have finished the quota. I find myself getting frustrated and fidgety and end up merely filling in the time. I end up feeling the exercise was fruitless, if not annoying.'

I know this one well. There can be a lot to this issue — too much to address here and undoubtedly unique to your psyche. You know who you are, your own motivation, performance or task orientation and so forth: any number of things can generate this internal distraction. However, in most instances the problem is either task completion or requirement fulfilment, rather than communion that is motivating us. There is not a real technique response to rectify this, but what needs to happen is for you to ask God to re-calibrate your thoughts, heart, motives and priorities. Devotional prayer is primarily about relationship, not tasks, goals or targets. You can have other prayer times for that. Your relational communion with God is a journey and not a destination. So for the choleric among us — back off — relax and allow God to guide the time, not you.

Scenario Four

'When I pray sometimes it seems so mechanical. I don't feel excited or joyful or even want to be there. And I don't think God is really impressed or blessed with my heart attitude so I might as well not do it and thus not insult God.' Or 'When I pray it's like talking to the roof. I know God's out there but he doesn't appear to be listening. I know that because he is not answering my prayers. It's all a waste of time!'

The former can sound almost noble — but it isn't. There is all the difference in the world between poor motivation and poor intent. Scripture (including passages we have studied) very strongly indicate that God wearies and becomes angry with us when we come with a formula or a confidence job. In other words, God examines the motives and if he discerns you are playing a game he will act with his loving discipline and help you make adjustments. Conversely, if you are struggling with passivity and indifference, that is different. You are not trying to 'trick' the Lord. You are just not getting into the prayer. It is all the more imperative at these times to go to God for his help. The enemy of your soul wants you to believe talking to God is a waste of time and to convince you that God is unimpressed — and that's a lie!

Do not forget that God wants to commune with you and when you set yourself to that end in the midst of 'dryness' he will begin to minister to you. In my experience it can take quite a while and often the Lord wants me to break through with consistency and endurance, put some iron in me, some guts and stamina.

At other times he can touch me when I am feeling bad, but whether I am happy or not; on fire or not; focused or not; indignant or not; passive or not — God is right there anyway. Our Lord just doesn't show his presence because I suddenly 'feel' like he has — just as he doesn't 'disappear' because I 'feel' he has. Every time you sit with the Lord, open the Bible and tell him you love him and want to commune with him, a transaction takes place whether you sense it or not. No prayer goes unheard (although it may go unanswered in the way you desire).

Conclusion

The Beginning of Your Journal

Well, have we been provoked, stimulated, challenged, enhanced, motivated, blessed or insulted? If any one of the above occurred, then marvellous! If not, then hey, we win some, we lose some. Anyway, as you probably gathered, being the astute person that you are, that this short foray wasn't really a 'how to get results in prayer' kind of ride was it?

Now that you are nearly at the end of it, I would love to mete out a diatribe on some of the prayer philosophies I have had the misfortune to encounter. But I will restrain myself. What I will do though is reiterate that prayer must first and foremost be about the Lord God and your relationship with the triune HIM. We have been sold many a 'bill of goods' in the name of prayer that endeavours to motivate us to this activity — success, prosperity, overcoming, breakthrough, healing, the list goes on. I wonder if a natural father's ability to provide such things for us in this life were to cease, would he be any less our father and would we cease communion with him? In the light of acquisition-based prayer, would not our reason to pray evaporate too? Would that therefore mean communication would stop? Heaven forbid that that would happen both in the natural and most certainly in the spiritual arena!

I am reminded of Oswald Chambers' words.

I hear it said that a man will suffer in his life if he does not pray; I question it (as do I). What will suffer though is the life of the Son of God in him, which is nourished, not by food, but by prayer. When a man is born from above, the life of the Son of God is born in him, and he can either starve that life or nourish it. We look upon prayer as a means of getting things for ourselves; the Bible idea of prayer is that we may get to know God himself (2).

I may sound like a stuck record but I'm compelled to assert again: we must not, please let us not, allow prayer to merely be an egocentric or result-based exercise. It requires commitment, diligence and the setting of right priorities. The extent of prayer in your life is a reflection of the worth you place on your relationship with your Father in heaven. In all good conscience I could not present to you a somehow 'easier' way. But fellow disciple, the truth is, we must engage our will with the Father's will and determine to seek him and persevere in the pursuit of that intimacy. It is an act of the will, whether inspired by joy, motivated by pain or censured by indifference. It is your will under his lordship that you must engage and act upon.

I have attempted in this journey to give you some ideas and hints on this vast subject but at the end of the day it is you and you alone who must choose.

Consider how august a privilege it is, when angels are present, and archangels throng around, when cherubim and seraphim encircle with their blaze the throne — that a mortal may approach with unrestrained confidence, and converse with heaven's dread Sovereign! Oh, what honour was ever conferred like this (4)?

To kick-start you on your new endeavour in devotional prayer, I have written a synoptic accountability journal for the next four weeks that will, I hope, help you to get into a pattern. Add to it, edit it, expand it, but most of all START using it. As you begin this journal, remember the words you have read here and persist — it is a discipline and as such must be worked on, not legalistically, but religiously! I pray God's hand upon you and his whisper in your ear that you may discover even more of the immeasurable depths of love, truth, holiness and power of our awesome God. Selah Shane.

Prayer Diary

Prayer is the 'Language of Relationship'.

Day 1

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

What thoughts did the passage generate?

What am I feeling about my devotional time? Good and bad? Why?

Did you tell Jesus you love him today? Did you thank him for his goodness and great love, his death on the cross for you and the forgiveness of your sins?

Prayer is the communication that maintains the connection that is imperative for your relationship with heaven to flourish.

Day 2

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

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Prayer is the agency that prevents the decay of intimacy.

Day 3

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

What thoughts did the passage generate?

What am I feeling about my devotional time? Good and bad? Why?

Did you tell Jesus you love him today? Did you thank him for his goodness and great love, his death on the cross for you and the forgiveness of your sins?

Devotional prayer is the declaration of commitment to an open, willed communion with our heavenly Father!

Day 4

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

What thoughts did the passage generate?

What am I feeling about my devotional time? Good and bad? Why?

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Prayer enables God to work with us, not just on us!

Day 5

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

What thoughts did the passage generate?

What am I feeling about my devotional time? Good and bad? Why?

Did you tell Jesus you love him today? Did you thank him for his goodness and great love, his death on the cross for you and the forgiveness of your sins?

The extent of devotional prayer in one's life is an indication of the priority one places on relationship with him.

Day 6

What did I read in the Word today? BookChapterVerse/s

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Did you tell Jesus you love him today? Did you thank him for his goodness and great love, his death on the cross for you and the forgiveness of your sins?

'I am often in my people's presence but they are so rarely in mine.'

Day 7

What have you learned about the nature of God this week?

What has God prompted you about in his Word this week?

1) Encouraging?

2) Correcting?

What action are you going to take on these prompts?

How are you going with your

1) Receptive prayer — What are you sensing?

2) Responding prayer — What are you sensing?

3) Requesting prayer — What are you sensing?

Have you made yourself accountable in these things and how?

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What am I feeling about my walk with the Lord? Encouraged/inspired; 'proceeding slow with purpose'; disappointed? Why?

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Endnotes

1 Tozer, A.W. Compiled & Edited by Gerald Smith, *Whatever Happened to Worship* (Camp Hill, USA: Christian Publications, 1985) P. 41

2 Chambers, Oswald *My Utmost for His Highest* (Newton Abbott: Nova Publishing, New Page-A-Day Edition, 1989) P. 247

3 Chrysostom, John http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/authors/john_chrysostom_a001.htm

‘As the church records unprecedented growth especially in the Third World it is significant for us as its leadership to seek to live lives of biblical purity, integrity and holiness. That’s the only way we can impact our nations. We cannot do that without prayer. This remarkable book “Prayer: The Language of Relationship” is not only timely for the entire body of Christ in this context but very significant for me at this point in my own ministry — highly recommended!’

Dr Appianda Arthur, Ph.D
President — Global Leaders Initiative (Partners In Discipleship)

‘*Empowering, inspiring, encouraging — and workable. This book should be in the hands of every Christian who desires to have an intimate relationship with God.* Unlike many other “prayer” books, its emphasis is on what prayer really is — a relationship. *It helps the reader to refocus on their prayer life and find a new and wonderful world of devotional communion with God. A must read.*’

Lerisse Smith, Alive Magazine

‘Shane Varcoe has *given us a challenging and easy read that encourages us to pray.* This book is a most down to earth and practical guide to prayer, and it strips away a number of myths about this “language of relationship”. *Put your seat belt on, because somewhere in this small book on prayer you are sure to take a jolt: Shane pulls no punches as he exposes the mistakes many hold in regards to their thinking on prayer.* But even more than that, he presents the scriptural truths in a fresh and inspiring way.’

Pastor Jim Reiher, Training Coordinator, UNOH

‘If you know that your prayer life could be better than it is, if you long for a more intimate relationship with Jesus, this book is for you . . . *Using this book as a basis for you devotions would be life changing. Highly recommended.*’

Pastor D. Marshall, Senior Minister Rose City Christian Centre

‘Shane is passionate about Jesus and authentically living life as his disciple in the real world. *This book exudes that passion, inviting us to journey deeper in our discipleship through, as he calls it, “the language of relationship”.* *Practical, insightful, challenging and credible.*’

Bill Hodgson, National Director, Campus Crusade for Christ, Australia

Shane Varcoe is currently Director of Education Services with Concern Australia, as well as author and presenter with Values 4 Life Schools Seminars, and Architect of STAND 4 Drug & Alcohol Education Unit.

Shane has been an ordained minister in two denominations and authored a number of papers, studies and books including *Prayer; the language of relationship!* and *Is you past bugging you, then stop it.* He also wrote, produced and presented the DVD Curriculum *Worldview and the Wheelbarrow!*

Along with both theological and secular credentials, Shane is a registered chaplain and has over 25 years of youth work, education and facilitation experience.

Shane has been married to Carolyn for 23 years and has two sons Jay and Mitchell and a daughter Rebecca.

Shane Varcoe is an excellent youth presenter at all age levels. He is inspirational, perceptive, charismatic and deeply concerned for the students. He has an incisive biblically literate mind and considerable skill in applied apologetics, which is invaluable when dealing with students in this period of extraordinary diversity and complexity of worldviews.

With respect to character and spiritual life Shane is an outstanding example of a true disciple of Jesus, with deep concern for private piety, devotional life, personal integrity and Spirit led obedience to the call of God in his life.

Dr K John Smith, Founder and International President of
God’s Squad Motorcycle Club and Founding Director of Concern Australia

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