

# 1994 A STEP BEYOND



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EXCERPTS FROM  
"PRAYER FINDING HEART'S TRUE HOME"  
BY RICHARD J. FOSTER

## A STEP BEYOND DAY ONE SIMPLE PRAYER

### Excerpt 1

We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness.

We are not quite sure what holds us back. Of course we are busy with work and family obligations, but that is only a smoke screen. Our busyness seldom keeps us from eating or sleeping or doing what we want to do. No, there is something deeper, more profound keeping us in check. It is the notion - almost universal among us modern high achievers - that we have to have everything "just right" in order to pray.

### Excerpt 2

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives -altruistic *and* selfish, merciful *and* hateful, loving *and* bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.

Jesus reminds us that prayer is a little like children coming to their parents. Our children come to us with the craziest requests at times! Often we are grieved by the meanness and selfishness in their requests, but we would be all the more grieved if they never came to us even with their meanness and selfishness. We are simply glad that they do come-mixed motives and all.

This is precisely how it is with prayer. We will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough, or know enough in order to pray rightly. We simply must set all these things aside and begin praying. In fact, it is in the very act of prayer itself-the intimate, ongoing interaction with God-that these matters are cared for in due time.

### Excerpt 3

Simple Prayer involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate Father. There is no pretense in Simple Prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and contradictory motives from God-or ourselves. And in this posture we pour out our heart to the God who is greater than our heart and who knows all things.

Simple Prayer is beginning prayer. It is the prayer of children, and yet we will return to it again and again. Jesus, for example, calls us to Simple Prayer when he urges us to ask for daily bread. As John Dalrymple rightly observes, "We never outgrow this kind of prayer, because we never outgrow the needs which give rise to it."

### Excerpt 4

We should feel perfectly free to complain to God, or argue with God, or yell at God. One time the prophet Jeremiah shouted out, "You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger. I am a daily laughing-stock, everybody's butt (Jer.20:7JB). And I can well imagine that Jeremiah shook his fist toward heaven as he spoke!

God is perfectly capable of handling our anger and frustration and disappointment. C. S. Lewis counsels us to "lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

We must never believe the lie that says that the details of our lives are not the proper content of prayer. For example, we may have been taught that prayer is a sublime and otherworldly activity, that in prayer we are to talk to God *about* God. As a result, we are inclined to view our experiences as distractions and intrusions into proper prayer. We, on the other hand, worship a God who was born in a smelly stable, who walked this earth in blood, sweat, and tears, but who nevertheless lived in perpetual responsiveness to the heavenly Monitor.

### Excerpt 5

...as we begin, we must never be discouraged by our lack of prayer. Even in our prayerlessness we can hunger for God. If so, the hunger is itself prayer. "The desire for prayer," writes Mary Clare Vincent, "is prayer, the prayer of desire." In time the desire will lead to practice, and practice will increase the desire. When we cannot pray, we let God be our prayer. Nor should we be frightened by the hardness of our heart: prayer will soften it. We give even our lack of prayer to God.

When you have had enough, tell God simple, "I must have a rest; I have no strength to be with you all the time." This, by the way, is perfectly true, and God knows that you are still not capable of bearing his company continuously.

I now want to give a counsel that may sound strange. It is that we should learn to pray even while we are dwelling on evil. Perhaps we are waging an interior battle over anger, or lust, or pride, or greed, or ambition. We need not isolate these things from prayer. Instead we talk to God about what is going on inside that we know displeases him. We lift even our disobedience into the arms of the Father; he is strong enough to carry the weight. Sin, to be sure, separates us from God, but trying to hide our sin separates us all the more. The Lord loves us perhaps most of all when we fail and try again.

**A STEP BEYOND  
DAY TWO  
PRAYER OF ADORATION**

**Excerpt 1**

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of three hermits who lived on an island. Their prayer of intimacy and love was simple like they were simple: "We are three; you are three; have mercy on us. Amen." Miracles sometimes happened when they prayed in this way.

The bishop, however, hearing about the hermits, decided that they needed guidance in proper prayer, and so he went to their small island. After instructing the monks, the bishop set sail for the mainland, pleased to have enlightened the souls of such simple men.

Suddenly, off the stern of the ship he saw a huge ball of light skimming across the ocean. It got closer and closer until he could see that it was the three hermits running on top of the water. Once on board the ship they said to the bishop, "We are so sorry, but we have forgotten some of your teaching. Would you please instruct us again?"

The bishop shook his head and replied meekly, "Forget everything I have taught you and continue to pray in your old way."

**Excerpt 2**

Prayer is the human *response* to the perpetual outpouring of love by which God lays siege to every soul. When our reply to God is most direct of all, it is called *adoration*. Adoration is the spontaneous yearning of the heart to worship, honor, magnify, and bless God.

In one sense adoration is not a special form of prayer, for all true prayer is saturated with it. It is the air in which prayer breathes, the sea in which prayer swims. In another sense, though, it *is* distinct from other kinds of prayer, for in adoration we enter the rarefied air of selfless devotion. We ask for nothing but to cherish him. We seek nothing but his exaltation. We focus on nothing but his goodness. "In the prayer of *adoration* we love God for himself, for his very being, for his radiant joy."

**Excerpt 3**

No, we start more simply. We learn about the goodness of God not by contemplating the goodness of God but by watching a butterfly. So here is my counsel: begin by paying attention to the little creatures that creep upon the earth. Do not try to study or analyze them. Just watch the birds and the squirrels and the ducks. Watch, do not evaluate, watch.

Go to a brook and splash some water onto your burnig face. In that instant do not seek to solve all the problems of pollution and the ecosystem; just feel the water. Most of all, do not try to find God in the water or to make yourself be thankful for the water. Simply allow the cool wetness to refresh your

skin. Now sit back and listen to the sound of the brook. Watch the branches of the tree overhead swaying back and forth. Notice the leaves fluttering in the breeze—notice their shape, their color, their texture. Listen to the symphony of rustling leaves and scampering chipmunks and twittering birds. Remember, I am asking you not to analyze, only to notice.

When we do these kinds of things with some degree of regularity, we, in time, begin to *experience* pleasures rather than merely scrutinize them. What this does within us is altogether wonderful. We are first drawn into these tiny pleasures and then beyond them to the Giver of pleasures. True pleasures are, after all, "shafts of the glory," to use the phrase of C. S. Lewis. As this happens, thanksgiving and praise and adoration will flow naturally in their proper time: "To experience the tiny theophany is itself to adore."

This is where we begin, but it is not where we end. Another stone to place across the waters of our narcissism is what Sue Monk Kidd calls "the grateful center." Each of us has such a center in our lives—a time and a place where we were free of all the grasping and grabbing, all the pushing and shoving, all the disapproving and dissenting.

You too have such a center, I am sure. Go to it in your imagination as often as you can and from that place allow whispered prayers of thanksgiving to flow forth.

Try to live one entire day in utter thanksgiving. Balance every complaint with ten gritudes, every criticism with ten compliments.

We are now ready for a stepping-stone that we could never have managed in the beginning; magnifying God. To magnify something, you make it look larger, increasing it out of proportion. To talk about ourselves or our activities out of true proportion is dangerous indeed, but when we magnify God, we are on safe ground. We simply cannot say too much about God's goodness or love. The most exaggerated things we can think of will still be far below what is actually the case.

Music is a marvelous aid in all this. Praise music abounds today that can ease even sad hearts into adoration. Joyfully we can join in with these songs even if we have little musical talent. At home or in the car no one hears but God, and he is pleased.

The final stepping-stone I want to mention is joyous, hilarious, foot-stomping celebration. We clap, laugh, shout, sing, dance. Celebration is best done in community, but even when we are alone we are never alone, for we are joining the jubilee chant of angels and archangels and living creatures about which we can only guess. Like Miriam we dance and sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea (Exod. 15). Like Mary our soul magnifies the Lord, and our spirit rejoices in God our Savior (Luke 1).

**A STEP BEYOND  
DAY THREE  
PRAYER OF THE MEDITATION**

**Excerpt 1**

Have you ever watched a cow chew its cud? This unassuming animal will fill its stomach with grass and other food. Then it settles down quietly and, through a process of regurgitation, reworks what it has received, slowly moving its mouth in the process. In this way it is able to fully assimilate what it has previously consumed, which it then transformed into rich, creamy milk.

So it is with Meditative Prayer. The truth being meditated upon passes from the mouth into the mind and down into the heart, where through quiet rumination-regugitation, if you will-it produces in the person praying a loving, faith-filled response.

**Excerpt 2**

In Meditative Prayer the Bible ceases to be a quotation dictionary and becomes instead "wonderful words of life" that lead us to *the* Word of Life. It differs even from the study of Scripture. Whereas the study of Scripture centers on exegesis, the meditation upon the Scripture centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written Word becomes a living word addressed to us. This is a time not for technical studies or analysis or even the gathering of material to share with others. We are to set aside all tendencies toward arrogance and with humble hearts receive the word addressed to us.

**Excerpt 3**

The simplest and most basic way to meditate upon the text of Scripture is through the imagination. In this regard Alexander Whyte speaks of "the divine offices and the splendid services of the Christian imagination." Perhaps some rare individuals can experience God through abstract meditation alone, but most of us need to be more deeply rooted in the senses.

This is a wonderful aid as we come to the text of Scripture. We are desiring to see, to hear, to touch the biblical narrative. In this simple way we begin to enter the story and make it our own. We move from detached observation to active participation.

Using the Imagination also brings the emotions into the equation, so that we come to God with both mind and heart. It is vitally important to understand the Scripture intellectually, but if we have not felt it emotionally, we have not fully understood it.

**A STEP BEYOND  
DAY FOUR  
PRAYER OF THE EXAMEN**

**Excerpt 1**

In the examen of consciousness we prayerfully reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of our days to see how God has been at work among us and how we responded.

You see, I am not talking about something complicated or unusual in the least. God wants us to be present where we are. He invites us to see and to hear what is around us and, through it all, to discern the footprints of the Holy.

After Israel defeated the Philistines, Samuel set up a stone memorial between Mizpah and Jeshanah and named it Ebenezer, for "hitherto the Lord has helped us" (1 Sam. 7:12, RSV). He was giving the people a specific way of remembering. That is what we are doing in the examen of consciousness. We are raising our own personal Ebenezer and declaring, "Here is where God met me and helped me." We are remembering.

**Excerpt 2**

Without apology and without defense we ask to see what is truly in us. It is for our own sake that we ask these things. It is for our good, for our healing, for our happiness.

I want you to know that God goes with us in the examen of conscience. It is a joint search, if I may put it that way. This fact is helpful for us to know for two equally important but opposite reasons.

To begin with, if we are the lone examiners of our heart, a thousand justifications will arise to declare our innocence. We will "call evil good, and good evil," as Isaiah says (Isa 5:20). But since God is with us in the search, we are listening more than we are defending. Our petty rationalizations and evasions of responsibility simply will not tolerate the light of his presence. He will show us what we need to see when we need to see it.

At the other end of the spectrum is our tendency for self-flagellation. If left to our own devices, it is so easy for us to take one good look at who we truly are and declare ourselves unredeemable. Our damaged self-image votes against us, and we begin beating ourselves mercilessly. But with God alongside us, we are protected and comforted. He will never allow us to see more than we are able to handle. He knows that too much introspection can harm more than help.

If the examination is solely a *self*-examination, we will always end up with excessive praise or blame. But under the searchlight of the great Physician we can expect only good always.

### Excerpt 3

Paul, you may remember, urges us to offer our bodies-our very selves-as a living sacrifice to God. This offering cannot be made in some abstract way with pious words or religious acts. No, it must be rooted in the acceptance of the concrete details of who we are and the way we live. We must come to accept and even honor our creatureliness. The offering of ourselves can only be the offering of our lived experience, because this alone is who we are. And who we are-not who we want to be-is the only offering we have to give. We give God therefore not just our strengths but also our weaknesses, not just our giftedness but also our brokenness. Our duplicity, our lust, our narcissism, our sloth-all are laid on the altar of sacrifice.



## A STEP BEYOND DAY FIVE UNCEASING PRAYER

### Excerpt 1

The biblical writers are not silent about the possibilities of Unceasing Prayer. "Pray without ceasing," enjoins the Apostle Paul (1Thess. 5:17). To the Romans he says, "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12, RSV). To the Ephesians, "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication" (Eph.6:18). To the Colossians, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2, RSV). And to the Philippians, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6)

The writer to the Hebrews urges us to "continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb. 13:15). Jesus gave us his parables on prayer to show us our "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). He modeled for us the reality of perpetual communion with the Father: "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5:19); "I can do nothing of my own. As I hear, I judge" (John 5:30); "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:11). When Jesus told his disciples to abide in him like a branch abides in the vine, they instantly understood what he meant, for they had watched for years his abiding in the Father (John 15:1-11).

I am sure you sense the desperate need for Unceasing Prayer in our day. We pant through an endless series of activities with scattered minds and noisy hearts. We feel strained, hurried, breathless. Thoughts dart in and out of our minds with no rhyme or reason. Seldom can we focus on a single thing for long. Everything and anything interrupt our sense of concentration. We are a distracted people.

Unceasing Prayer has a way of speaking peace to the chaos. We begin experiencing something of the cosmic patience of God. Our fractured and fragmented activities begin focusing around a new Center of Reference. We experience peace, stillness, serenity, firmness of life orientation.

Maybe this sounds impossible, even undesirable, to you. At times I share the feeling. Life is complicated enough as it is. Why should we add another religious duty onto an already overcommitted schedule? Besides, it sounds unbelievably difficult. Nobody can think of God all the time. Who would even want to?

If you identify in any way with these sentiments, I want to encourage you. God does not expect you to dive immediately into the ocean of constant communion and swim from one continent to the other. We move into this way through a process

of practiced living that is both understandable and practical. And while this "practice of the presence of God" is strenuous, everything else ceases to be so. We become increasingly focused, increasingly centered, increasingly synoptic. More and more we find ourselves going through the stresses and strains of daily activity with an ease and serenity that amaze even us...especially us.

Besides, steady, faithful communion is in some ways easier than our normal way of praying. It is harder to pray inconsistently than consistently in the same way that it is harder to play a good game of tennis when we practice only once in a while. Do we really think we can experience integration of heart and mind and spirit with an erratic prayer life? Do we really believe we can, like Moses, "speak face to face" with God as someone would a friend by our unpredictable prayers? No, We develop intimacy by regular association. We develop ease as well. Why ease? Because we are forming fixed habits of righteousness. In time these "holy habits" will do their work of integration so that praying becomes the easy thing, the natural thing, the spontaneous thing-the hard thing will be to refrain from prayer.

#### Excerpt 2

Commenting on breath prayers, Theophane the Recluse notes "Thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and unified."

#### Excerpt 3

But can *you* live this way? Can *I* live this way? "No way!" we say. But wait: maybe it is more possible than we first imagine. To be sure, this life of unbroken fellowship is not automatic or effortless. This should not surprise us; anything worth anything always takes effort. Brother Lawrence admits that it took ten years before he fully entered into the practice of the presence of God. Laubach declares, "The talk to which You have called me is as hard to accomplish as scaling Mount Everest, but You can accomplish it if I can keep my will attuned to Your will....That is *my* task, to hold my will to the current of power, and let You sweep through endlessly."

Arduous, yes, but not impossible-and all the more so as we understand the process involved, one step at a time.

#### Excerpt 4

So we begin in simple, conspicuous, even artificial ways. Schoolteachers can use the ringing of the bell to remind them to lift their breath prayer into the arms of the Father. Those whose favorite color is purple are reminded of God's continuous presence each time they see the color purple. Surgeons can be prompted to prayer by each scrubdown as they prepare for an operation.

The bank teller can pray whenever someone comes to the window. We can put pressure-sensitive labels on the refrigerator and the bathroom mirror and the television set. Washing dishes, making beds, waiting in supermarket lines - all can call us to prayer. Jogging, swimming, and walking can remind us as well. The idea is surprisingly simple. Frank Laubach called it his *Game with Minutes.*, and we too can turn it into a delightful game. How many minutes today can we turn into holy communion?!



**A STEP BEYOND  
DAY SIX  
COVENANT PRAYER**

**Excerpt 1**

Covenant Prayer is a profound interior heart call to a God-intoxicated life. It leads us to the crossroad of personal decision. It guides us through the valley of sacred commitment. It beckons us up the alpine pathway of holy obedience.

*Covenant* is a Bible word. You may be aware of the covenant God made with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David. Jesus, you will remember, established the New Covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins.

The New Covenant that Jesus established in his blood demands no less. He has written his law not on tablets of stone but on the fleshy tablets of our hearts. We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Calvary's sacrifice is God's binding commitment. He has made covenant with us. Commitment demands commitment. What is our response? Are we willing to offer up lives of obedience in return?

**A STEP BEYOND  
DAY SIX  
INTERCESSORY PRAYER**

**Excerpt 1**

If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving other.

When we move from petition to intercession we are shifting our center of gravity from our own needs to the needs and concerns of others. Intercessory Prayer is selfless prayer, even self-giving prayer.

In the ongoing work of the kingdom of God, nothing is more important than Intercessory Prayer. People today desperately need the help that we can give them. Marriages are being shattered. Children are being destroyed. Individuals are living lives of quiet desperation, without purpose or future. And we can make a difference...if we will learn to pray on their behalf.

Intercessory Prayer is priestly ministry, and one of the most challenging teachings in the New Testament is the universal priesthood of all Christians. As priest, appointed and anointed by God, we have the honor of going before the Most High on behalf of others. This is not optional; it is a sacred obligation-and a precious privilege-of all who take up the yoke of Christ.

**PRAYER JOURNAL**

Keep track of the prayers you pray this week. Write them in this journal.