Prayer As Intimacy With God

By Dave Butts

Most of our churches are busy churches. We have youth programs and senior citizens' programs, as well as music programs and ladies' programs. Many such programs are generated from busy committees like the missions committee, the evangelism committee, the building committee and….well, the list could go on and on, couldn't it? There is certainly nothing wrong with programs and committees – as long as they don't distract from that which is really essential in the Christian life – intimacy with Jesus.

The danger that all of us face is that we often choose that which is important over that which is essential. Christian service and activity is important. Serving on committees and developing programs that help the Church carry out its mission is vital. However, we tend to be so activity-oriented that we often forget that the heart of Christianity is a relationship with a person – the person of Jesus Christ. This relationship is the essential element that often takes a back seat to our Christian service.

One example of how Christians overlook this relationship with the Lord is often seen in our prayer lives. We come to God with our lists. We pray for the sick, the missionaries, our country, the church, our families, our finances…and the list continues. There is nothing wrong with such prayers. We ought to be praying for all of these individuals and situations on a daily basis. But too often that is where our prayers end. What happened to the relationship? Where in the midst of such prayers have we drawn near to God?

For many, this intimacy with Jesus is the missing element in our prayer lives that has the potential to rejuvenate us spiritually and enable us to carry on in our service to the Lord. There is a lot of discussion today about burnout in the church. Among those who serve and care and give of themselves, there seems to be a point of breakdown. Exhaustion – physically and emotionally as well as spiritually, saps well-meaning Christians of their strength to continue serving. I believe that many of the problems relating to burnout can be overcome by a restoration of relationship in prayer. It is what we might call intimacy with God in prayer.

It is important at the outset to remember that intimacy with God is not just *our* desire. From Genesis to Revelation we see a God who loves His people and desires to fellowship with them. Though it is impossible to know the complete thoughts of God in this matter, it is believed by many theologians that God created man for the purpose of enjoying fellowship with those created in His own likeness. We can only imagine what it was like for Adam and Eve to fellowship with a God who walked in the cool of the Garden.

With the fall of man and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, that fellowship was severed. The rest of Scripture shows God desiring and planning to restore that fellowship. God wanted it restored so much that He was willing to allow His own Son to die on a Roman cross. Intimacy with God has its origin in the mind of God rather than in the desires of men.

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Since this is such an important matter to God, it also needs to be high on our list of priorities. As we commit ourselves to grow intimately with God through prayer, it is important that we examine Biblical accounts of those who had this intimate walk with God.

One of the best examples in Scripture of a man who experienced intimacy with God in prayer is David. David is the one whom God described as a man after His own heart. David was also a fine example of a sinner. He was an adulterer and murderer, with a list of serious family problems. How could David be called a man after God's own heart?

Could it be because David had such a great desire for God? In spite of his sins and problems, David expressed a longing for intimacy with God. Can you feel the passion in David as you read the following verses from Psalm 63:

"O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:1-8).

When was the last time you prayed such a prayer? When was the last time you laid aside your prayer lists and simply cried out, "God…I have to have you. My whole being longs for you. It's like a thirst that cannot be quenched!"

Let's look closer at this Psalm to see how we might draw near to God as David did:

An Expression of Desire

The Psalmist cries out for God, expressing his desire for intimacy with Him. Could it be that we are not intimate with God because we don't want to be? We've never gotten thirsty enough to desire Him and Him alone? Are our lives so saturated with things and activities that we never really miss being alone with God? Perhaps our prayer needs to be: "God, create a longing within me for You. Make me thirsty for the living water that is You."

Remembrance of God's Glory

David refers back to times of worship when he had experienced God's presence in a very special way. He remembers this with joy and longs for more such experiences. And so should we. Yet we often fear the emotional responses that occur when we encounter God in times of intense worship. Rather than dealing with our emotions, we often do the unthinkable…we avoid encounters with God. Because of this, we find ourselves with a generation of Christians with no passion toward God, fearful of their own emotional response should they actually encounter the God of the universe.

Expressions of Praise

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The prayer of intimacy is a prayer of praise. The more we get to know God, the more we will desire to praise Him. The exciting thing about our great and wonderful God is that we can never plumb the depths of His nature. There is always something new and exciting about His love, grace or holiness that will bring forth praise from the lips of the worshiper. One thing that can be of great help is to recognize that the praise spoken of here is not the Sunday morning church variety. It is personal worship – an intimate time of praise by a man for his creator. How much more meaningful would our Sunday morning corporate worship be if it was the culmination of a week of personal praise by the individual members of the Body of Christ?

Spontaneous Times With God

Have you ever had anyone question you about the length of time of your devotions or what time of day you have them? As important as that set time may be, that's the beginning place for intimacy with God, and not the whole matter.

Intimacy with God is not only planned, but also spontaneous, occurring throughout the day and night as our thoughts turn to God. David writes that he remembers God as he is lying upon his bed. As he wakes from sleep in the night, his thoughts turn to God, and what was a mere bedroom has suddenly become a sanctuary.

In our busy world today, how good it is to know that simply turning our thoughts to God can transform our lives and allow us to experience God's presence in the midst of our activities. Driving a car, washing the dishes or working in the garden can all become times of worship as we turn our thoughts to God as David did during the watches of the night.

Dependence Brings Intimacy

As we grow in our dependency upon God, we will grow in our intimacy with Him. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." He likened our dependency upon Himself as that of branches attached to a vine. If we do not remain closely attached, we can not survive.

David says these things to God:
"You are my help."
"My soul clings to you."
"Your right hand upholds me."
He recognizes his dependency upon God and draws even nearer as a result.

Before we leave David, the man after God's own heart, we need to look at one more Psalm, or rather one verse of a Psalm: *"One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple"* (Psalm 27:4).

If you could ask one thing of the Lord, what would it be? Long life, riches, fame, or maybe like Solomon, you would ask for wisdom. What does the man after God's own heart ask for? Intimacy with God! Dwelling in the house of the Lord…gazing upon the Lord's beauty. Is it any wonder God called him a man after His own heart?

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God is calling the Church today to that sort of love relationship. He is preparing the Bride's heart for her Bridegroom. He is calling us to draw near. And His promise is wonderful…if we will draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.

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