

How I pray, or, Ask and You Will Receive
By John Gwynn, delivered 1/03/2009
The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Psalm 100

A psalm. For giving thanks.

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
 come before him with joyful songs.
Know that the LORD is God.
 It is he who made us, and we are his;
 we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
 and his courts with praise;
 give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
 his faithfulness continues through all generations.

These are the first words out of my mouth, spoken aloud every morning as my feet hit the floor, sitting on the edge of my bed. In these first moments of my day, I say three prayers.

First, though, I spend several minutes centering my self, doing a body scan and some breath work before I actually begin saying and physically feeling the words of these prayers. I usually move promptly into this position on the edge of my bed as soon as I realize that I am awake. If I am not willing, if the bed is too warm, or if I wish that I could go back to sleep but can't, I commence the centering and breath work as I lie in bed, the intention, the hope, being not to enter into ordinary thought before praying.

That first prayer, a psalm, is one of praise and gratitude. I then say a second prayer, psalm 121, a prayer about receiving heavenly help. The third and last prayer is our Creed, one of the richest, most beautiful and helpful prayers that I know.

I then straighten up my room, make my bed, set up a "sacred" area for my sitting, or mediation, and scoot Joey & Wookie, my cats, out of the room, all the time being mindful again not to start thinking. I then sit down to 30-45 minutes of silent mediation followed by 15 -20 minutes of prayer, spoken aloud and physically felt as earlier.

These final prayers are a combination of memorized scripture, well known prayers, and prayers that I have crafted myself. There are also periods of unstructured, free verse prayer and silence, which I also consider prayer.

I began this morning's sermon with the prayer that I begin my morning prayer practice with every morning, and I will end this sermon with the prayer that I end my morning prayer practice with every morning, a prayer of my own crafting.

"How I pray, or, Ask and You Will Receive." The vehicle for my message today is definitely a very personal one, "How I Pray", a compendium of my personal experiences,

of my journey with prayer. So I had to ask myself, “Why my experience with prayer and not some academic, ostensibly theological message on prayer that would be more suited to a broader audience, such as this audience, or any audience, would most likely be?”

Though I know it to be true that all our individual life experiences are unique, that the approaches, ways, methods, and tools that work for each of us vary widely, that my particular vehicle may not be your vehicle, the broader, more universal message that I do want to impart to you today, my experience that I want to share with you is this:

“Ask and You Will Receive”.

As my message took form, I realized that it was not solely a message about prayer, but a message about scripture, faith, hope, and prayer. For me, there is a joy, an excitement, an almost overwhelming earnestness and fervor that I experience each and every time I contemplate this journey. And I want you to know, to believe, that each and every one of you can experience this too.

There was a day when I only “thought” about praying, “thought” that I would soon begin to live the goodnesses and truths that I learned from sermons, prayer, and myriad other sources, but the reality of actually praying always eluded me. I could have even said of myself, “That I am not the kind of person who would pray like this or that.” There was a time when I actually felt, no knew, that my way of being, that the way I moved through this life was fixed and implacable, that living the actual goodnesses and truths of scripture, hope, faith, and prayer was impossible for me. And that it was an unjust God that would not bestow his favor, his peace, upon the unable.

There are many degrees to this place of inability, the more extreme, as was the case with me, to the less extreme, as may be the case for most. I actually feel blessed and graced that my situation was as extreme, as life threatening as it was. Otherwise, I may not have ever begun this journey. And let me say, from whatever place on this spectrum of inability that one starts, it is impossible to conceive of the transformation that this journey can bring prior to actually experiencing it.

Prayer is a great, enjoyable practice that works, and each and every one of us can develop a deep and abiding practice, whether or not one currently believes such a thing possible.

Though, hopefully, there actually is some greater structure, some outline, to my words this morning, I am going to say many, many things about prayer, both small and big. Don’t try and hold onto everything that I say; just listen for one or two ideas, practices, approaches that resonate deeply with you. These can be a springboard to a vital prayer practice, to a genuinely self motivated practice, a practice that can and will change your life.

Someone once asked, “Why pray when God is omniscient? When he already knows your deepest affections and thoughts? When he already knows all the deepest affections and thoughts that you have ever had or ever will have?”

Why pray?

Our Swedenborgian faith tells us that free will is fundamental to our faith in general and to the development of our faith as individuals in particular. Our faith tells us that the

Lord, that Providence, constantly puts a choice in front of us, the choice to turn towards the Lord, towards Goodness and Truth, or away from the Lord, towards evil and falsity.

For me, prayer is one of the main mechanisms for constantly, for consciously, for intentionally keeping this choice in front of me, and prayer is one of the main tools for helping me to continually make choices as they arise.

Here are some of the Hows & Whys in which prayer helps keep me turned towards the Lord, towards Goodness and Truth:

- **Prayer as a receiving, not an asking**
- **Prayer as a practice to continually create, modify, and correct the story, or myth, that I wish and hope to be my life: my Faith**
- **Prayer as a practice to generate the genuine willingness that will allow the Lord to reform and regenerate the deepest affections of my heart**
- **Prayer as a tool to turn my attention, willingly away from the hells, from evil and falsity, and towards the Lord, towards Goodness and Truth.**
- **Prayer as a practice to transform my entire life, especially my inner life into a prayer, in and of itself**

Before I address these Hows & Whys individually, let me say that I struggle with and experience all the same challenges, daily and on an ongoing basis that everyone does. I experience doubt, insecurity, defensiveness; the list goes on, and on. But I experience them in a different way today, most importantly, because of my prayer practice; I am able to better accept these character traits and am, to a large degree, no longer their prisoner:

- **Prayer as a receiving, not a requesting**
 - I don't think it can be said any more plainly than in Mark 11 of today's Gospel
 - *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."*
 - This receiving is:
 - Almost Audacious
 - It assumes a confidence, an assuredness
 - I am like an antenna, body relaxed, visualizing reception from the inmost and the outmost, I am resting in the Lord, awaiting the Lord
 - And a preemptory attitude of gratitude for what I am receiving helps too
- **Prayer as a receiving, not a requesting**
- **Prayer as a practice to continually create, modify, and correct the story, or myth, that I wish and hope to be my life: my Faith**
 - By the writing, memorizing, saying, contemplating, and growing and changing of my prayers, I maintain and learn this story, my faith.
 - What is this story? This faith? –
 - The details of this story, this faith come to me in many ways.
 - scripture
 - Swedenborg's Writings

- theology workshops
 - online classes at SHS
 - prayer itself
 - spiritual poetry
 - numerous sources, theologies, & faiths
- experimentation and verification both in prayer and in life
 - by saying them repeatedly, I remember them
 - when I remember them, I try them
 - And I am willing to try them, because a major part of my prayer is about this willingness to try them
 - Matthew 11's words has actually proven true, and what they mean for me^l
 - ³⁰*For My yoke is wholesome (useful, ^lgood--not harsh, hard, sharp, or pressing, but comfortable, gracious, and pleasant), and My burden is light and easy to be borne.*
- Today's Proverbs reading truly reflects a deep, and fundamental sentiment that I hold onto as I enter into prayer, almost an aura around my praying
 - The silently held intent of all my prayers, my praying:
 - *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.*
 - Swedenborg's words on revelation in today's writing well describe the contemplative aspect of my praying:
 - *"He will pray for you' means that it will thus be revealed. This is clear from the meaning of 'praying'. Regarded in itself prayer is talking to God and at the same time some inner view of the things that are being prayed for. Answering to this there is something akin to an influx into the perception or thought of the person's mind, which effects a certain opening of his internals towards God."*
 - As I say my prayers slowly, pausing after each phrase, each verse, and wait, new meanings, new shades of meaning bloom and appear and old meanings slip away
 - For me, this contemplative approach is
 - always about me
 - When I pray or read scripture contemplatively, the questions that I need to ask is not, "What does this scripture mean?", but "What does it ask of me?"
 - St. Francis Prayer
 - *Lord, make me a channel of thy peace;*

*that where there is hatred, I may bring love;
that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of
forgiveness;
that where there is discord, I may bring harmony;
that where there is error, I may bring truth;
that where there is doubt, I may bring faith;
that where there is despair, I may bring hope;
that where there are shadows, I may bring light;
that where there is sadness, I may bring joy.*

- When I pray these lines, I am praying for the willingness to allow the deep changes necessary for the removal of hatred, wrong, discord, error...in myself. Only then I would be able to bring their counterparts, peace, forgiveness, harmony, truth...to the external situation, to others
 - In psalm 23, when I say, “*surely goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life*”, I mean that I hope and wish to bring goodness and loving kindness to all situations, not that I will always meet with goodness and loving kindness in others ...
- Also key to this contemplative approach is that I am praying daily to:
 - Remember all the various parts of my story and to
 - Project my these article of faith out into each day with the wish and the hope that I can remember them, especially in times of need
 - Sometimes I actually go through the day in detail, sometimes it is just a general projection
 - **Prayer as a practice to continually create, modify, and correct the story, or myth, that I wish and hope to be my life, my Faith**
 - **Prayer as a practice to generate the genuine willingness that will allow the Lord to reform and regenerate the deepest affections of my heart**
 - Our deepest affections constitute our will, what we really love, also known as our ruling love, or loves. Everything that we think, say, feel, or do is generated from these loves, these affections of our hearts.
 - Depending upon where we are on our journey, on the choices that we have made, these affections can vary from the most base and natural loves to the most spiritual and celestial loves.
 - So in my prayer, I pray to see myself as I actually am, no holds barred
 - This can be a difficult thing to see, So I also pray strongly for the acceptance of myself just as I am, to know and remember that the Lord loves me wherever I am on this journey
 - I am effectively praying to be willing to let the Lord in to work at this level, what ever the resistance, the fear, to change anything, to try anything, to let go of anything, to destroy or kill anything necessary.
 - **Prayer as a practice to generate the genuine willingness that will allow the Lord to reform and regenerate the deepest affections of my heart**

- **Prayer as a tool to turn my attention, willingly away from the hells, from evil and falsity, and towards the Lord, towards Goodness and Truth.**
 - Willingness is key, the willingness to take one's attention off of unhelpful behavior and turn it towards something good, something true, like prayer or scripture, or silence
 - The anti-resentment is a good example
 - Not repression, as you are keeping the best ends in mind, both for yourself, and for others as you make this effort, assuming that you believe and remember the promises of The Word, mentioned earlier.
 - Memorized scripture is particularly helpful here, as one is willingly turning one's attention to the goodness and truth of the prayer or scripture
 - The prayer/scripture does not have to exactly relate to the evil, the falsity, the particular difficulty that one is experiencing
 - I have found the verse from Matthew 11 particularly helpful whenever I am disturbed, for any reason
 - *Come to me, all you who labor, are heavy laden, and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest, I will ease, relieve and refresh your souls...*
 - It is one's willingness and intention that make this different from a purely psychological effort, and different from repression
 - Silence and keeping one's attention on the body, or the breath, is just as good as praying with words here. I consider this silent attention a form of prayer too.
- **Prayer as a tool to turn my attention, willingly away from the hells, from evil and falsity, and towards the Lord, towards Goodness and Truth.**
- **Prayer as a practice to transform my entire life, especially my inner life into a prayer, in and of itself**
 - Explain
 - I look at my entire inner life, my entire inner dialog as a prayer. And my experience and deep introspection has shown me that most of my thinking is unhelpful. In light of this conclusion, I have come to a place where I turn to prayer, the body, and silence, whenever I find myself "thinking". The results have been miraculous. The more obvious cases of negativity, judgment, etc are easy to see. But let me end with one positive example, which could be more difficult to see: I am driving along thinking out some theological/philosophical/psychological issue. If I really listen to what I am doing, I find that I am really trying to convince myself of my righteousness. So I take my attention off of the train of thought and recite some verse, or intentionally pay deeper attention to my driving and the road...
- **Prayer as a practice to transform my entire life, especially my inner life into a prayer, in and of itself**

I have shared allot about how & why I pray, about the many ways that prayer can be used as a tool. I have spoken about our lives as a living prayer.

We are each so different, the how's and why's of each of our prayers may be seemingly very different. Or, to be more honest with ourselves, the life of prayer that we may "envision" for ourselves would be very different, uniquely our own.

But there is no question for me that each of our lives is meant to be a prayer. To do this we each need to explore and learn our own individual hows, whys, and tools, and where and when they are needed. We each need our own how's and why's.

And don't judge this prayer that is your life wholly by its outer indications, by your words and actions, for by that rule this could be a discouraging experience. This prayer is better evaluated by your inner life, by the how's and why's of your prayer, by when and how often you are willing to use your tools, to return to your prayer.

As today's Swedenborg writing noted, *"But the experience varies according to the person's state and according to the essence of whatever he is praying for. If his prayer springs from love and faith, and if they are wholly celestial and spiritual things about which and for which he prays, something like a revelation is present within his prayer which manifests itself in the affection of the one praying in the form of hope, comfort, or some inward joy."*

If you feel that your "prayer" falls short of this, and certainly most of ours do, then your prayer can be about the genuine willingness for your prayer to come around to this ideal. As long as you are willing, your "prayer" is perfect!

As We leave these moments of prayer and meditation
We do so knowing that our prayers have been heard and answered

And as we enter into this day, Lord, to live Your victory and Your salvation
We do so walking in love, in peace, in harmony, in serenity

In praise and gratitude towards you, Lord Jesus Christ

In blessing towards all beings

To live a life abundantly, to the full, till it overflows
As you lived and died for us to have, for:

Amen...