

**Janet Goodall** brings wisdom on effective praying

# The prayer life of a doctor

## key points

Prayer is an immense privilege and like Jesus, busy doctors need both to establish patterns of prayer that work and also to exercise perseverance and patience in their praying.

Prayer like respiration should be a constant activity and both the 'breathing' model and Scripture give help and guidance to overcome the problems in praying that we all experience.

Habitual sin, swift decision-making, idleness and times of great struggle can adversely affect our praying but prayer offered in helplessness commits the problem to the power of God, who is then able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

Doctors are not alone in leading busy lives. Jesus was busy but still took time to draw close to the Father in prayer, responsive to his word. We must do the same.

Prayer has been described as the breath of the soul. We breathe in (are inspired) by the Spirit, God's pneuma (Genesis 2:7, John 20:22) and breathe out our prayers in the name of the Lord Jesus (John 15:16). Through prayer we support each other (2 Corinthians 1:8-11) and join in the battle against spiritual wickedness (Ephesians 6:12-18.) It is an immense privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

### The practice of prayer

Just as respiration keeps us alive, so we should daily stay alive to the unseen presence of God, often saying 'thank you' as well as 'help'. We can instinctively pray for those in the blaring ambulance, or for careworn patients and passers by. Yet relationships do not thrive on monosyllables. How then should we pray?

Some expand on the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) whilst others use the 'ACTS' sequence: approaching God with Awe and adoration, prompting Confession of unworthiness and specific sins. Thankfulness follows, for mercy and grace (Hebrews 4:15,16) and answered prayer. Supplication, so often put first, comes last.

Prayer requests mount up. No one else might be praying for colleagues and heartsink patients. So

our lists grow and will occasionally need pruning. Whilst personality influences prayer life, listening and responsive hearts are essential. Like Jesus' first disciples, we are called to perseverance in prayer (Luke 18:1).

30 years after faithfully committing herself to pray for a Cambodian Christian college under threat of extinction, an elderly lady heard how 100 churches had since been born from that ministry.

### Problems in prayer

**Wandering thoughts.** No doubt we all know these, especially when harassed. As well as praying about the preoccupation itself, a notepad is useful for things needing attention later.

### I don't feel as though I'm getting through.

Assurance of God's attention is based on facts, not feelings. He has promised never to leave us (Hebrews 13:5) and is always ready to hear our prayers (2 Chronicles 7:12-22). The Spirit of Jesus intervenes for us when we don't know how to pray (Romans 8:26-27). Praying through a psalm, finding a prayer partner or prayer meeting can all help. Doubts should not become excuses for neglecting Christian fellowship (Hebrews 10:25). It can warm our hearts again.

**I've prayed and prayed about this but God doesn't answer.** Prayer must be in line with God's will (John 15:7.) Whereas he can and does say both 'Yes' and 'No' he frequently says 'Wait'. Over time

he may change our hearts' desires (Psalm 37:3-4) whilst hindsight often explains his delays. He frequently gives more than we expected (John 11:4). Even so, prayers for physical healing are not always answered as had been hoped. Sometimes God's answer is to heal tension and anxiety rather than to eradicate the disease.

**I get jumpy if I go without food. Should I fast to pray properly?** Prayer and fasting often go together in Scripture, as at times of special temptation (Matthew 4:1-11) or decision-making (Acts 13:2) or to free the mind for a time of concentrated prayer (Luke 2:36-37; Acts 14:25). Fasting should be voluntary and is not necessarily abstinence from food, but could include avoiding unnecessarily long conversations, too many meetings, novels or other distractions - whatever is our particular weakness. The point of a fast is to focus on God and to seek his will.

**Some people pray in tongues but I don't. Am I not spiritual enough?** Those who have this gift find it helpful when other words fail, when feeling dry, or when longing for worthier worship. Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, but in chapter 13 he focuses down on the greater importance of love, the first fruit of the Spirit. Gifts are gifts, and Paul indicates that not all are given to all (1 Corinthians 12:11). He warns against (unloving) conceit and envy, but encourages keeping in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26).

### Powerless prayer

As with literal respiration and physical dyspnoea, the vital flow of pneuma, the Spirit, can be impeded in comparable ways.

**A blocked airway.** Airway obstruction can kill. Similarly, harboured sin blocks off the free flow of the Spirit, but repentance and confession let in the oxygen of the forgiving grace of God.

**Intermittent bronchospasm.** The body's reaction to inhaled toxins reminds us how readily our souls risk pollution in a godless society. To cherish sin in our hearts is to stop the Lord's ears (Psalm 66:18). Instead, his Spirit will help us to identify and avoid harmful agents.

**Running too fast** makes us breathless. Habits of swift decision and prompt action can habituate us to approaching God hastily too. Early morning quiet is thwarted by nights on call or affectionate small children. It takes determination and imagination, perhaps to try a prayer walk, jog or swim. An appointment with a prayer partner can become a shared appointment with the Lord - but we might just need a good sleep! Lack of exercise, physical and spiritual, predisposes to dyspnoea. To drop altogether the discipline of spiritual exercise leaves us unfit for the race set before us. Nehemiah met his (often dangerous) tasks strengthened by times of earnest

prayer, but his SOS prayers were effective, too.

**An unbalanced diet** impairs exercise tolerance by producing either obesity or malnutrition. Souls, too, become inert on junk food. 'Relaxing' for too long with TV or magazines can produce spiritual anorexia, as will certain videos in conference hotel rooms. We can, of course, 'pray the world news' and also need to unwind, but to stay spiritually fit we need also to spend time with God's word. The mind reflects what it feeds on, so if our goal is to develop the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) we must guard the input.

**Carrying a heavy load, or an uphill struggle** can both have us panting and ready to stop. When Moses felt this, he was urged to share his workload and give others a chance to grow (Exodus 18:17-23). At times, though, on top of all else come family problems, difficult relationships, or sickness of body, mind or emotions - all ours to shoulder and made so much heavier when working in isolation. 'Helplessness is the real secret and the impelling power of prayer,' said Hallesby. Yet at such times, periods of concentrated prayer can be nigh impossible. *The Doctor's Life Support 2* will provide iron rations, but we should ask others to pray for us, knowing, too, that the Lord's own sustaining care never ends (1 Peter 5:7).

### Prayer changes things

In our medical lives, we regularly meet with overwhelming difficulties. By trusting them to the love of God we can prayerfully, often wordlessly, channel God's love to others.

A very young baby faced major surgery and radiotherapy. The doctor, moved by the child's state and the prospect of major disabilities, told her mother, 'I'll pray for Emma'. Years later the mother reported how she, and eventually Emma herself, had come to know the God of all comfort.

When he developed acute leukaemia, Prof David Short wrote, 'I am prepared for storms ahead. Isaiah 43:1-2 comes to me with great comfort at this time: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; ... you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you.' After commenting on the lack of bridges or ferries over the approaching river, he added, 'Whatever happens, he will be with us. I am asking my friends to pray that I may be enabled to run the last lap well and that Joan (his wife) may have special help from the Lord.' These prayers were abundantly answered.

Prayer offered in helplessness commits the problem to the power of God. He is then able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

*Taken from a talk given at a CMF breakfast in Birmingham, March 2005.*

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### further reading

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