

Reflections on prayer

John Watts



John Watts, D.Min., Ph.D., is senior lecturer on the faculty of education, Avondale College, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

From a Christian perspective, living can be described as the continuous worship of God in a universe that has a sacred origin. Spiritual relational worship means offering oneself as a living, holy sacrifice, acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1). Prayer has much to do with restoration for living or abiding in God. The spiritual photosynthesis enables us, as spiritual beings, to regenerate throughout life by preserving the sacred and separating from the profane. Far from being a ritual, prayer is a way of life—as breath is to the body, so prayer is to the soul. Without spirituality (in simple terms, a personal encounter, engagement, and resultant saving relationship with God), prayer cannot survive. Without prayer, spirituality cannot survive.

The limits of language

Fundamentally, as a spiritual unifying presence between living beings who know, love, and care for one another, prayer transcends language or words. Prayer, therefore, is not always about asking or seeking, though it retains a significant, intimate conversational, supplicatory, and intercessory character (Matt. 7:9–11). Rather, it exists as a means by which we are restored to and remain within God's family and are able to sustain a relationship with God, to reverence, honor, and glorify Him. Words, then, are relatively unimportant in a life of prayer. Far more important is the attitude, the intent, the meaning that words can only superficially represent.

Of course, we do pray for one another with words. These words, however, are merely the representation or expression of our deepest soul feelings and attitudes. Prayer is one of the many rays of the powerful light of love connecting lives, expressed in thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that are sometimes beyond our own understanding. Often we do not know how to express a prayer, how to properly dialogue, because our thoughts and feelings lie so deep within the soul and, by comparison, our language is so limiting. The Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf, because human language is too reductionist and cryptic. Human language reduces and fractures what we understand and what we intend to communicate. The Holy Spirit receives and clarifies our prayers, making them whole, specific, and personal. Simultaneously, the Holy Spirit dialogues with us when we are prepared to be silent and to actively listen to the "Word of the Lord."

Pray for peace

Prayer brings balance—balance in life, worship, work, leisure, communication, relationships, race, gender, and community. Prayer leads to inner peace, and that allows outer peace with others. The reality behind a faith of integrity resides in personal experience. Without a personal experiential relationship to God, religious profession is merely theory or ideology. Prayer relates to God through personal experience and faith. We need to differentiate between a genuine experience of God and a mental conceptualization of God in much the same way as we need to differentiate between the Christ portrayed in the Christian Bible and the metaphysical and often romanticized Christ constructed by modern societies.

Even on the cross, the thief experienced a real and immediate experiential and prayerful encounter with Christ, a new spiritual-birth experience based on faith alone. The thief turned away from himself and turned to Christ in humble penitence, turned away from selfishness to godliness, by faith. His short conversational supplicatory prayer to Christ was immediately answered, and the thief died at peace with himself, the world, and with God. Significantly, though, he was not relieved of his physical and emotional suffering, and he experienced an excruciating death. Prayer is a natural inner fruit of a conversion experience bound up with faith. Conversion is the necessary prerequisite for prayer, and, therefore, prayer goes beyond religion. Prayer evidences faith in Christ (1 Tim. 2:1; 5:5)—a means by which

we can understand ourselves and feel connected to God. It contrasts with separation or absence or decay and coheres with wholeness, presence, and growth.

Prayer and suffering

Prayer ameliorates absence and grief in a world of evil and death. Death as the enemy of life regresses presence to absence. Suffering and death separate and absent our loved ones from us, sometimes in the most painful circumstances. In coming to terms with the absence of our loved ones, and the associated deep grief that naturally accompanies such absence, we can, through prayer, keep ourselves mindfully attuned and committed, as beneficiaries of God's grace, to the realities of the Christian life. Prayer underwrites our faith in the ultimate things to come, when suffering and death themselves will be separated and absented from the future promised world. Prayer, then, can be identified as the spiritual antidote to world-induced unhappiness, for it recognizes that only through suffering is holiness achieved. Prayer sustains our ability to love and hope and endure throughout our life's journey.

Prayer consists of a reflexive attitude of mindfulness in daily life—not passive introversion, or a series of requests, mantras, or praises only. It is mindfulness of one's being *in* the world but not being *of* the world. Consequently, prayer consists of a transcendent relational communication with God (not being of the world) thoroughly embedded and embodied in the practical and pragmatic concrete realities of the world (being in the world). The life and words of Jesus admirably demonstrate this mindfulness aspect of prayer. He modeled to humanity the real nature of living mindfully: what is real and how humans should live. Prayer as mindfulness is firmly rooted in the trials and tribulations that all of us face on a daily basis. At the same time, however, prayer, as a God-oriented attitude of mindfulness, connects and

WORDS, THEN,
ARE RELATIVELY
UNIMPORTANT IN A
LIFE OF PRAYER. FAR
MORE IMPORTANT IS
THE ATTITUDE, THE
INTENT, THE MEANING
THAT WORDS CAN
ONLY SUPERFICIALLY
REPRESENT.

unifies us to the whole cosmos, so that we move from a life of fragmentation and separation to a life of wholeness and integration with God's cosmos.

Prayer and the kingdom of God

The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9 ff. and Luke 11:2 ff.) portrays Christ's mindfulness of being in, but not of, the world, for it addresses both God's holiness and our human needs. The Lord's Prayer is especially significant to Seventh-day Adventist Christians because the prayer is highly likely to be a significant depiction of the Ten Commandments in the context of the Exodus experience. Christ prays for the incoming kingdom of God, anticipated by the fourth commandment, which has retrospective and prospective orientations, directing us back to the original Creation and to the future redemption that we shall enjoy under the reign of God in the new kingdom. The roots of the Lord's Prayer are situated in the two central pillars of Seventh-day Adventism, namely, Creation/re-creation (salvation) in Christ with the seventh-day Sabbath as its signifier, and the second coming (advent) of Christ to inaugurate the new eternal kingdom of God. Prayer, then, effectively means to be a continuous Sabbath experience, wherein we find rest in God as, similar to the Exodus Israelites

in their wilderness wanderings, we wander through a foreign land until the coming of Christ. Prayer becomes the medium to bring deep peace and joy to the soul, to authenticate a sense of belonging, and to fulfill the promise of entering fully into the kingdom of God at the return of Christ.

Prayer and faith

Prayer is respectful and not ostentatious, and respect acknowledges the sacred in all living things. Respect induces honor—a sense of dignity, humility, and reverence. Christians are mindful that "our Father" (Matt. 6:6–9) is God, the Almighty, and that Christ is God,

the Creator. Though Jesus taught His disciples to pray to God as their personal Father, their "Daddy," the emphasis focuses on Christians having a childlike and humble trust in a personal loving Father-God who willingly converses with them, and not on falsely assuming that it gives license to treat God as some "sugar daddy" to be addressed in shallow, phony, or arrogant familiarity. Public prayer reveals the soul.

Faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13) are essential components of any religious faith tradition. For Christianity, the faith-hope-love triad is centered in and empowered by Christ, producing harmony in the souls of individuals and churches. Prayer is the glue that binds them together and gives them presence and power. Without prayer, faith, hope, and love are absent. Christianity based on a personal and continuing engagement with Christ ceases to exist, and, at best, it becomes an ideology. Prayer, then, is neither an addendum, nor a feminized subdivision of religion mostly for women and children, nor only ritualistic words read from a prayer book (though there is a significant role to be played by mindfully written prayers). Prayer is presence, prayer is power, and prayer is life for the Christian and for Christianity. As with faith, hope, and love, prayer is a gift of the Spirit.

Let us, indeed, pray. ■