24/7 PRAYER RESOURCES

Notes

In this prayer series, Lyndall Bywater a Salvationist from the UK Territory and freelance speaker and writer on prayer, will explore ways in which different people make connection with God in prayer. For some, connection comes most easily through the outside world—they glimpse God most readily through the lens of nature, friends and everyday life. For others, the journey towards God starts by shutting out the world, and allowing stillness and solitude to open up deep places within them. The third and final study explores an altogether different 'way in'.

Prayer Personalities (Part 1)

Looking Out

By Lyndall Bywater

Psalm 8 (NLT)

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by a stringed instrument.

1 *O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth! Your glory is higher than the heavens.*

2 *You have taught children and infants, to tell of your strength, silencing your enemies and all who oppose you.*

3 *When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—*

4 *what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?*

5 *Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour.*

6 *You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority—*

7 *the flocks and the herds and all the wild animals,*

8 *the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents.9 O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!*

Seven-year-old Daniel pondered for a moment. His mother could almost see the cogs whirring in his brain.

"So Daniel," she said. "What is prayer?"

The cogs ceased, and the wisdom ushered forth: "It's talking to someone you can't see about things you don't understand, and then waiting for an answer you won't be able to hear."

Daniel's mum chuckled to herself, secretly thinking her son might have a very good point.

We in the church have worked hard to 'normalise' prayer. Faced with centuries of religious tradition, where devotion was measured in church attendance, and where valid connection with God came only through the priest, we have sought to redress the balance by emphasising the imminence of God and the accessibility of prayer. Prayer is talking to a friend; prayer is spending time in the company of a loving father; or, as the old Sunday school song would have it: "prayer is like a telephone, for us to talk to Jesus".

And all of these things are true, in their way. Yet, as I go into my room, close the door and pray to my Father in Heaven, I cannot escape the truth that, no matter how many times I've sung that chorus, God remains far beyond my grasp. I still pray, but my prayers seem insufficient to breach the barrier of my own ceiling.

Notes

Of course, how we feel about our prayers doesn't alter their effectiveness one iota, but I believe we are nonetheless right to want our prayer times to be about relating, rather than just reciting. The Holy Spirit was given that we might connect with the Godhead; he was given as the companion who would reach in to us, through the limitations of human understanding and experience, and link us to the Eternal. How he does that will be different for each one of us, but Scripture offers us some helpful suggestions along the way.

Psalm 8 is the song of someone who has very definitely connected with God in prayer. In fact, it is the song of someone who has been inundated with God. We have no idea, of course, where he was when this poem formed in his mind, but the language might offer a clue. As I read it, I can well imagine him sitting outdoors somewhere, soaking up the sights and sounds around him, as he thinks on eternal things. Suddenly everything is speaking to him: from the cry of the tiniest child to the tracks of the farthest planet; everything is drawing him to meditate on his God.

St Francis of Assissi might well have loved Psalm 8 for the same reason. He is said to have been an unconventional religious, because he tended to lay aside the trappings of traditional monastic worship in favour of the simplicity of the created world. His reputation for being loved by the animals came not from some Dr Dolittle complex, but rather from the fact that he connected with God through nature. It was as he cared for the created that he met with the creator.

Christian tradition has tended to prize the abstract over the concrete. It is as though you are more holy if you can achieve deep communion with God without the help of outside stimulae. Yet, Scripture sets no such standard. On the contrary, it seems to positively encourage the business of finding God in the material world around us.

For the psalmist, observing the created world becomes a way of understanding his own place in God (verses 3–5). As he looks at spectacular, distant celestial bodies, he is brought to new awareness of how beloved he must be, for the maker of the universe to have created him, in the midst of such splendour. In his letter to the Romans, Paul affirms again the idea that creation speaks the truth about God to us (Romans 1:20). So it's not surprising that, for some of us, being in the midst of creation might prove one of the best ways to connect with God in prayer.

I even get the impression that the psalmist might have been surprised into this psalm. The first thing to catch his attention is the voice of a child (verse 2), and as he listens to it, he hears beyond the words, the pitch and the tone; he hears something much deeper—a note of innocent, trusting praise which shakes the very strongholds of the enemy.

It is as though God has set 'booby traps of grace' throughout creation—things we stumble across, things which trip us into a sudden awareness of his presence and his glory. If we are out and about with open eyes and open ears, he will flood our senses with himself.

Before we leave Psalm 8, we must stop and note its beginning and its ending. The middle verses are indeed a joyous observation of the natural world, but the 'bookends' of this poem are an unambiguous affirmation of the true object of our worship (verses 1 and 9). Creation is to be admired and marvelled at, but only the creator is to be worshipped.