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# The Practice of Public Prayer

A Short Guide



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**“Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.” (Acts 12:5)**

So even while the church joined in petition, an angel of the Lord stood by Peter, brightening his cell, and awaking him to chains falling off and gates swinging open. The church thought about an angel too, but were amazed to find that the man they were praying for was actually there at the door!

Perhaps one of the greater weaknesses of the assembly prayers is that habit has accustomed us to forget their power, so that we maybe no longer attend with the expectancy and concern of saints who are in touch with their living God. We may need to revive the spirit of the early churches, who, when they heard that the apostles had been charged by the Council not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus “raised their voices together in prayer to God,” (Acts 4:24) till the place was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness.

Things had not changed in the apostle Paul’s mind when he appealed from prison for the prayers of the Philippians (Phil.1:19), the Ephesians (6:19), the Colossians (4:3) — and how many more? He could tell them too of the results achieved, as assemblies through the Fellowship joined in supplication for his witness (Phil.1:12).

So we are in grave danger if, even while exercised about personal prayer-power, we lose sight of the role of the assembly prayers. Praying together demands unity, and we must guard against any weakening of this, whether through neglect of the church meeting, or of other forms of prayer-partnership. So important is our grasp of the power of concerted prayer that we take some space first to note how it is commended to us in the teaching of both Old Testament and New.

### The power of concerted prayer

When David thought of prayer he compared it to **the incense of the evening sacrifice (Ps.141:2)**. The Tabernacle was first and foremost a form of united service on behalf of a people. This is echoed in the wonderful description of the **“golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” in Revelation 5:8**; and cp. 8:3. The intercession of a people together, with one divinely acknowledged centre, is the theme of king Solomon on the great day of dedication of the Temple (2 Chr.6, 1 Chr.28:12). For believers who would serve Christ as Lord today, the essential place of assembly prayer is laid down among the chief services in which the first church of God “continued stedfastly” (Acts 2:42 RV).

The Letter to the Hebrews further advances our understanding by **describing our approach as to “the throne of grace”**, where the Son of God, as great high priest, enables us to “... receive mercy, and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb.4:14-16). That He acts here especially on behalf of **a people together** is made clear in Hebrews 2:17. Here our prayers are blessed with His understanding, His advocacy, and the savour of His name.

So we devote the rest of this booklet to a study of how we can perfect the practice of this great service, and avoid the pitfalls that can be all too familiar.

### Practical approaches

Heading our list of possible improvements is the importance of **coming to the meeting with a burden**, and with matters for **thanksgiving**. It makes a great difference to our contribution if we have become personally exercised about specific matters, and have thought about them before we come together. Sometimes those whose private and family prayers are alive and well filled begin to forget just when in the last few days they prayed for some concern, but they can be certain it

has not been neglected. This brings an intimacy and an appreciation of the problem that is a help in itself, and lends conviction to the way in which the subject is expressed.

Coming with a burden deals swiftly with inactive gaps, and deepens our involvement when we realise that several others have been living with the same concern. We know then that the theme is not recurring just because it was mentioned in the opening announcements. After all, is it natural that someone's need should go unmentioned by us before the Lord, and be brought out of store only at the meeting? David wrote, "Evening, morning and noon ... He hears my voice" (Ps.55:17).

We might ask, then, whether a prayer session is deficient if some of the points brought before the group have not been mentioned thereafter. It is unlikely, however, that those points have been forgotten, or are being neglected by most present. Once announced to the saints, they will surely be prayed about in private, and as the Spirit leads, they will doubtless be given fuller expression at later meetings. But it's important for those who lead in prayer to be exercised about paying due attention in that same session to the matters that others add to the prayer-list.

Then, we cannot overestimate the value of **thankfulness**. Paul wrote, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ... And be thankful" (Col.3:15), and he said the saints should be "overflowing with thankfulness" (2:7). Long before, Israel found that when, going into battle, they began to sing and to praise, the Lord dealt with their enemies (2 Chron.20:22). It is good when announcers ask for matters for thanksgiving, and when all the saints give themselves to the appreciation of the lovingkindness of our God. Out of this comes a balanced perspective.

So we come to the sometimes neglected fact that the **great prayers of Scripture begin with adoration of God**, and contemplation of His

greatness. It's heartening to read again how Jeremiah followed this pattern, even when the Lord's instructions left him in a quandary (Jer.32:17-23). Compare this with the structure of the prayer of the saints in the first prayer-meeting recorded in detail in Acts 4. Thinking about the great God of heaven, who is our Father, cuts our problems down to size! Then came meditation on the intervention of God in past years. *Finally* came the immediate request.

We will learn to curb impatience to get on to the circumstantial detail that we are too prone to regard as the real meat of praying. This is one lesson that Elisha taught his servant when he was overwhelmed by the power of the besiegers, till he was shown the horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha (2 Kin.6:15-17).

Another basic is to accept that **consistency and faithful attendance** are essential. Too often we expect God to take up our cause when we have become excited about it. Rather, the Lord can work most fully with "remembrancers" who do not cool off and give up. The Lord Himself told the parable of the widow and the unrighteous judge to teach the power of perseverance, and it was one of the earliest of His lessons to His own (Matt.7:7). So if we find the prayer meeting ineffective, let us be careful to ask if we have waited on the Lord sufficiently — until we are ready for Him to give.

Often the Lord chooses to wait, perhaps because what we are asking for takes time to work out; and perhaps more often because we need to do more ourselves, and achieve a better condition before He can bless.

"And therefore will the LORD wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgement; blessed are all they that wait for him" (Isa. 30:18, RV. — a verse much of which is sadly lost in the NIV).

The Lord can use most those who abide at His hand ready for His use. The church were in the right condition to respond to the Jews' threats with immediate prayer together because, among other things, they had continued steadfastly in the prayers, were practised, and were united in this.

### The conduct of the meeting

Now for the practical detail of the meeting itself. How can we **help ourselves to concentrate**, when we have perhaps arrived after a tense and tiring day at work? Or an equally exhausting day of the special tension of loneliness at home, where every decision has to be taken on your own? Or an evening vibrating with the demands of children and husband, all to be met by Mum, of course? Here are some suggestions:

1. Try to remember **what the Bible says** about the topics brothers mention in their prayers.
2. **Ask God to speak to you**, through what the brother is saying, and personally to you during the pauses.
3. Link your own burden with **the words of the hymns**, as well as with what brothers who lead may be saying. Sisters who come with their unheard contribution don't find the pauses too long. They're more disappointed in brothers who talk too long!
4. Think about **the great priest** through whom we are making approach to the throne of grace.
5. Listen for answers in **verses quoted**, or in the **ministry or Bible Reading**. Does the Spirit not often bring verses to your mind in response to the problems being expressed?

6. Try **listing in memory the topics** that have been covered, as you would if you were reporting the content of the meeting to someone kept at home.

### **For those who lead**

This brings us to the responsibility of brothers who speak in audible prayer to keep before them the fact that they act on behalf of the whole gathering. Here is a short list of reminders:

1. Think of **how the concerns of others**, especially sisters, and the youngest, **can be included**. The Lord sees their hearts, and will never neglect their burden, but brothers should not forget them.
2. **Take account of what others have brought**, so that time is not consumed returning over the same ground, when other brothers are waiting to move on to new subjects, unless you are genuinely constrained to pray for the same urgent need that others have mentioned. It does help to do this in a fresh way, with **further development of thought**. What fresh stage has someone's illness reached? The announcer, or any close to the patient, can help by finding this out, or passing it on, with respect for confidentiality and avoidance of graphic detail.
3. **Speak out for all to hear comfortably**. Try to vary the pace and pitch of voice, to help listeners concentrate, and to be more expressive. Avoid the habit of using a steady, unchanging pace to allow you to think ahead.
4. It is an appreciated courtesy when praying with others to **make language and ideas as fresh and stimulating as possible**. It is no weakness to speak to one theme at a time, and **get up later** to present a further theme on your heart. Try listening for your own pet phrases, or ask someone else. You may be surprised that they can tell you them at once! Newcomers don't understand why we need to mention the name

of the Lord so very often.

5. **‘Speaking truth in love’** applies here as in conversation. It is of course more arresting to mention the intimate detail of someone’s circumstances, but let us guard against unwise or hurtful betrayal of confidence, when we are being trusted by others to handle their concern with sensitivity.

6. **Read your hymnbook** between meetings, instead of relying on a scanty memory to produce hymns. The saints deserve freshness and true thoughtfulness in the range of hymns used. Time spent with these flowers of spiritual experience is never time wasted.

7. We all are encouraged if someone wants to talk to us with appreciation about the topics of our prayers. When did you or I last **ask a sister if the prayers covered the points that were a concern to her?** That’s a more rewarding conversation afterwards than the petty detail of the week’s routine.

8. **“And without faith it is impossible to please God,** because anyone who comes to Him must **believe that He rewards** those who earnestly seek Him” (Heb.11:6). Faith requires personal holiness also, since the Lord will not hear, if we do not deal with our sin (Ps.66:18; Matt.6:15).

8. The prayers will be enriched, and made more significant for all, if **the announcer encourages all to contribute something to their list,** whether they form one list of points, as is more suited to a large company, or all mention their concerns in an informal spell before the prayer session.

### **Special occasions**

When a friend’s illness becomes acute, or a local disaster occurs, or any other major event, prayer is given fresh focus by meeting at a separate

time for earnest supplication and intercession. Leaders can be encouraged in this exercise by request from others in the church.

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The Lord asked if there would still be faith on the earth when He returned. Let us do all we can to ensure that when He comes to the air for us, we will have maintained the assembly prayers with the order, and the expectancy, that He would recognise as from Himself.

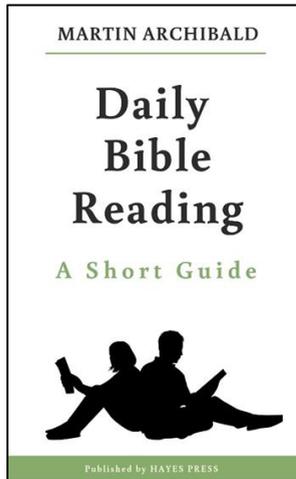
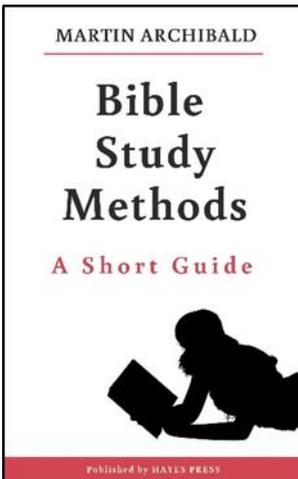
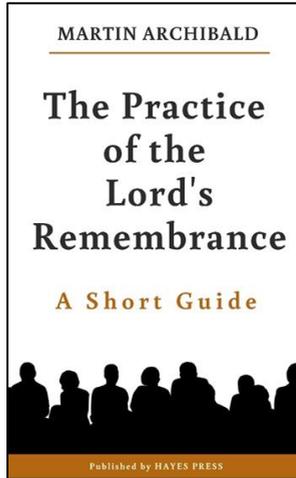
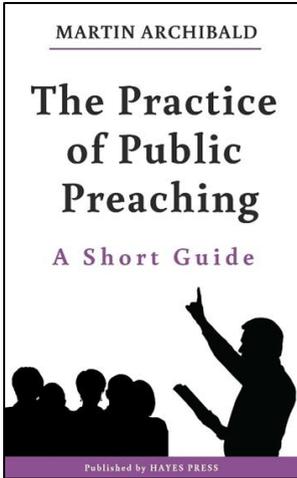
When crowds came flocking to the weekly prayer meetings in Olney, Buckinghamshire, England, John Newton asked Thomas Cowper to join him in writing hymns for them, which later became famous as ‘Olney Hymns’. One was, ‘Oh for a closer walk with God!’ Another was, ‘What Various Hindrances We Meet’:

*What various hindrances we meet  
When coming to the mercy seat!  
Yet who knows the worth of prayer,  
But wishes to be often there?*

*Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw;  
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;  
Gives exercise to faith and love,  
Brings every blessing from above.*

*Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;  
Prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright;  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.*

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