

TURNING YOUR THOUGHTS INTO PRAYERS

(HOW TO MAKE PRAYING AS NATURAL AS BREATHING)

I had told the pastor I'd be glad to pass out brochures door to door. But when he handed them to me, I thought, *I'd rather go home, curl up, and read a book.* All my introverted, shy tendencies oozed forth. But because I'd agreed to pass out the material, I gritted my teeth and ventured up the walk to the first house.

As soon as a young mother appeared at the door balancing a toddler on her hip, I slipped into my habit of turning whatever's going on inside me into a prayer. Seeing the weary mom triggered it, I'm sure, because I felt like such a misfit when my children were small.

I showed her the brochure with the service times. *Give her patience, God. This little one isn't potty-trained.* When I handed her the pen with the church's name on it, she smiled. *What a glowing smile—make Yourself real to her.* As I left the house, I saw that though my official task was to pass out literature and pens, my real task was to pray for everyone I encountered.

Soon I began enjoying this new role as pray-er. I stopped at homes abandoned due to damage from our Northridge earthquake and prayed for the people who had lived there. *Living with relatives can be both wonderful and difficult, God. Sustain them.* This task of going door to door, which started out as a dreaded duty, became a fun and interesting mission of prayer.

MAJORING ON PRAYER

We make the command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) more difficult and mysterious than it needs to be. Perhaps it's a simple matter of making prayer the "main business of our lives," a phrase Richard Foster uses in *Celebration of Discipline*. When prayer becomes our major life activity, we experience what it means to offer a sacrifice of praise to God *continually* (Heb. 13:15), *devote* ourselves to prayer (Col. 4:2), and pray "in the Spirit on *all occasions*" (Eph. 6:18). So many times the word *pray* is linked with words such as "always," "everything," "constantly," and even "night and day" (Ro. 1:9–10; Col. 4:12; 1 Thess. 1:2, 1 Thess. 3:10). Our perpetual self-talk – the chatter in our heads as we commute, prepare sandwiches, or do exercises – can be transformed into a continual conversation with God.

Does this conjure up pictures of traffic accidents occurring as people skim their prayer lists while driving? It doesn't have to be that regimented. We can turn the thoughts in our heads, the longings of our hearts, and the urgings of our spirits into prayer.

I felt annoyed each time I looked at the basketball backstop in our backyard. My friend's son Justin had pulled the basket down. When it broke, he laughed and said, "I guess it's not the kind that pops up." We hadn't found time to repair it, which meant

our family had one less activity to enjoy. Every time I looked at it, I felt annoyed with Justin. Then I felt annoyed with myself. Justin had been in a drug rehabilitation center recently. His parents had their hands full. Why couldn't I use the broken backstop as a reminder to pray for Justin? So I did.

PRAYING GOD'S WILL

If we're going to weave prayer through the day, greater intimacy with God is bound to develop. When we run out of things to say to God, we can bring up whatever or whomever is in front of us. That is why I prayed for the mom while passing out brochures that day.

But what do we pray? Whatever piece of God's will we understand. Some of His will we don't see clearly, but much of it we do. My friend Karen prayed for God's will when she was attracted to a married co-worker. Whenever she was around him or thought about him, she prayed for scriptural truths to become real in his life. "I prayed that he would be a loving husband and a firm, gentle father," she says. "I prayed that God would use him to further the Kingdom. I prayed that I would figure out how to be his friend. It was pretty hard to flirt with him when I was praying for him that way, and my feelings soon returned to normal." In the same way, we can pray that we will consider others' needs (Phil. 2:3), examine ourselves for sin (2 Cor. 13:5), or fulfill our part in helping others to know Christ (1 Cor. 3:6).

BREATH PRAYERS

But how do we turn our thoughts so quickly? One helpful method is the time-proven "breath prayer" format, repeating a prayer phrase that has great meaning. For example, when situations grieve me but I am powerless to change them, I find myself praying, "Into Your hands."

I am afraid of upcoming surgery – Into Your hands.

I don't want my job to end – Into Your hands.

I want this person to love You, but he doesn't – Into Your hands.

Offering this breath prayer is slowly transforming my self-talk and attitude. I'm less willful and more open to God's will.

To those of us who have spent our energies reciting long lists of prayer requests, breath prayers may seem hackneyed or infantile, but they aren't. Breath prayers are so simple that they're revolutionary. In *A Testament of Devotion*, Quaker pastor and college professor Thomas Kelly wrote this about breath prayers:

The processes of inward prayer do not grow more complex, but more simple. . . . We begin with simple, whispered words. Formulate them spontaneously, 'Yours only.' Or seize upon a fragment of the Psalms: 'So long as my soul after You, O God.' Repeat them inwardly, over and over again.

Breath prayers are very different from "vain repetitions," which Jesus described as lofty, impressive recitations made for others to notice (Mt. 6:7). Breath prayers are quiet groanings of the heart that become more meaningful as we use them. Unlike mantras, which people repeat to focus their thoughts in meditation, breath prayers take the complicated longings of the heart and offer them to God in the dailiness of life.

We need this simplicity in a culture that wows people with words – adorning them with graphics, using them to manipulate and convince. Breath prayers resemble the unembellished approach that Jesus recommended when He spoke of offering a simple yes or no (Mt. 5:33–37). For too long, we've thought that short, simple prayers are not sophisticated enough. What a relief to grow into a relationship with God where we don't have to go on and on explaining everything. We can pray simply and enjoy being with Him in peace.

INSPIRED BY SCRIPTURE

A breath prayer often flows out of a Bible passage. Once, while pondering Jesus' prayer in John 17, I settled into verse 23, especially the last phrase, "You have loved me." Since then, when I need reassurance of God's love, I find myself saying, "You have loved me!"

Here are a few other breath prayers that have become common for me.

Show me the heart of this person. This prayer can ignite in us Jesus' compassion toward people others ignore (Mt. 20:34, Mk. 1:41). As I look into the faces of my two normal, yet stubborn teenagers, my thoughts can turn bitter: *Why can't this kid cooperate?* or, *Who asked for such a stubborn kid?* Instead, I'm learning to turn such thoughts into a prayer, asking God to show me what's going on in the hearts of these near-adults. I don't get telegrams from God, but this prayer puts me in a frame of mind to listen to my kids better or watch what God might be telling me through their body language or speech. It has a way of wringing the self-importance, laziness, or grouchiness out of my attitude and giving me a heart for others.

What You will, when You will, as You will is Thomas à Kempis's archaic yet poetic wording from *The Imitation of Christ*. It resembles Jesus' plea in the garden: "Let this cup pass from me" (Mt. 26:39). I like these words when I find it difficult to surrender people and situations to God.

This replaces my normal self-talk, *How can I change this person?* I am, of course, powerless to change anyone, but I wear myself out trying. When I breathe these words of surrender, I accept that people and events I loathe can become part of God's purpose.

Help me to see how I can spur this person on toward love and good works is my personalized version of Heb. 10:24. This breath prayer came about one day when I was meeting an old friend for lunch. She is one of the funniest people I know, and as I drove to the restaurant I giggled about all the silliness we'd enjoyed in the past. When I arrived, I found her down and moody, needing me to listen and love her. It took about 10 minutes for me to slow into her gear (and resist resenting that we

weren't going to have a rowdy lunch!) and truly tune in to her. Throughout our time together, I prayed this breath prayer, and it helped me listen to her, empathize with her, and be the friend I needed to be.

I offer this prayer when I meet people I admire and feel like cooing over them: "You're just such a wonderful Christian. I would love to be more like you." I know that's not wise or appropriate. Instead, I remind myself that my hero is also a struggling child of God. Then I focus on how I can spur this person on to love and good works.

As we incorporate prayer into all the moments of our lives, it becomes part of the rhythm of daily life, a backdrop to all activity, so that our heart becomes our private chapel all day long. What a rich place to be.