

This book is for you if

- you sometimes think that prayer is a strange thing to do;
- you often don't know how to get started with prayer;
- you find the Psalms confusing (let alone the whole Bible!);
- you would like to know how to USE the Psalms in your spiritual life;
- you wonder if other churches in the world have something to teach us;
- you are interested in one person's spiritual journey in prayer.

Join the community!

Spiritual Exploring on Facebook from Rev Andy

On Facebook I have a newsfeed for friends at /revandybooks, with a page /biblenbrief.

I aim to post something most weekdays about things that I find interesting, e.g.

- Hidden historic corners of London

- Films (Linda and I try to see a film a week in a real cinema)

- World faiths

- Saints from the past or other historical "throwbacks"

- Bible surprises

And at weekends if something significant happens.

I welcome ALL comments. A popular post was "Was Jesus a humanist" (a reflection on Jesus' conversation with the rich young man in Mark 10.17-22). I got comments from atheists, Christians and Muslims. I love that.

I also have a private group "Spiritual Exploring" for more focussed discussions. I would love it if you joined in! E.g. "Religion: good, bad or both?"

Discovering Psalms as Prayer

How we can use
the Psalms morning,
noon and night

Rev Andy Roland

Foreword by Rev David Runcorn

Author of Choice, Desire and the Will of God,
Spirituality Workbook, Space for God etc.

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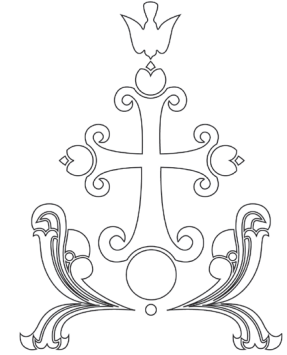
Foreword

At the heart of the bible is a collection of prayers, songs, poems and reflections called the Book of Psalms. They express every mood, dilemma and longing of life. From deepest love to angry protest they address God, themselves and the world and always with fresh and startling honesty. 'All of life is there'. There was a deep and practical wisdom that led Hebrew and early Christians to shape their daily praying around the regular reciting of the psalms.

This is a discipline that has been lost in our times and our prayers are the poorer for that. In *Discovering Psalms as Prayer* Andy Roland weaves together the wisdom of a faithful, personal pilgrimage with practical guidance for reading the psalms. It will be a gift to those wanting to make that discovery for themselves.

We are in his debt.

Rev David Runcorn



“

“I always pray at sea, never on land.”

Sir Francis Chichester, round-the-world yachtsman.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Prayer

In one of their classic sketches, Dudley Moore asked Peter Cook about prayer:

Dud ‘Ere, Pete, d’you pray”

Pete Yeah, Dud, I pray, if I want something, like. Like, if I’m ill and I want to get better so I can see the footie on Tuesday I say, “God, if you’re there, please listen to me. If you’re not, don’t bother. But if you are, please let me get better by Tuesday, and I’ll believe in you and go to church and all that.” ‘Course, if you do get better by Tuesday, you don’t know if it’s God’s what’s done it or if you’d have got better in any case.

Dud *Yeah, I know, it's difficult.*

Dud has a point. Prayer is difficult. And mysterious.

How do I know if I am praying? Do I kneel or stand or sit or lie prostrate? Do I say words out loud or say them in my head or not use words at all? Am I alone or with my wife or with loads of other people? Am I in a special place like a church or am I at home or walking the dog? Am I asking Someone to heal my wife's cancer or just enjoying a sunset? The answer to all these is, yes, possibly.

There are two main components to prayer, talking and listening. Both have problems attached. (I am not going to consider other modes of prayer, e.g. gazing, holding, dancing etc.)

Talking

When we talk in prayer, we are often asking for things, for ourselves or for other people. But what are we actually doing? We are saying or thinking words, and there is no one else actually there. Yet it doesn't feel as if we are talking to ourselves. It's a bit like posting a letter or sending an email. You have communicated to someone, but there is no evidence yet of anyone receiving it. A common complaint about prayer is that one's words keep "bouncing off the ceiling".

Is it in fact a form of madness, just as talking to oneself is seen as a sign of madness? Even if God is real, if there is no perceptible interchange, does the charge of madness still stick? I don't think so, simply because when you see someone muttering to themselves on the street, they seem completely

cut off from the people around them, while my experience is that any form of prayer acts to connect me better with those around me.

But what about asking for things, like the healing of someone dear to us from a terminal disease? Is it not at the very least presumptuous of us to pray a few prayers and expect the laws of the universe to crumple at our verbal onslaught? Perhaps the instrument of effective prayer is not our words, but the degree to which our lives are surrendered to God and so be able to be a clearer channel for his will. And perhaps what we think of as a supreme tragedy may look different from the other side of eternity.

Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944) was asked if prayer worked. He replied, *"When I pray coincidences happen, and when I don't they don't."*

I think that the purpose of words in prayer is primarily the need to be honest – with the One beyond us and also with ourselves. If what is killing us is the terminal diagnosis one's wife has just received, then not to voice it is a supreme act of dishonesty. If on the other hand what is uppermost is the need for a parking space, then if that is where we are, that is the prayer we should pray. Over time we will hopefully be taught to live life at a deeper level.

One of my favourite prayers comes in the American comedy "Tin Men" (marvellous, about a feud between two aluminum siding salesmen, do watch it). Danny de Vito is at a salad bar in the Smorgasbord Restaurant and prays.

Tilley lifted his eyes to the ceiling.

"God," he murmured, "if you're responsible for all this stuff down here, maybe you've got a moment's attention for me... Between the IRS, this Home Improvement Commision and Mr Maringay, I got it up to here with this bullshit. To be frank with you, I'm in the toilet here. If you can see your way -"

He was interrupted by a woman with a tray who was attempting to reach over him.

"Listen, I'm praying here ... go around."

"I wanted to get some salad," she said indignantly.

"It's out of order... go around.... Do what you can, all right? I appreciate it. Amen."

(Tin Men by Martin Noble p.118)

It's a great prayer because it starts with worship (contemplating the salad bar and lifting his eyes upwards), telling the truth, (I'm in the toilet here), and ends with thanks, (I appreciate it). Maybe a little less self-centredness would not go amiss, (I'm praying here... go around), but we all struggle with that.

And if you watch the movie you will see that the prayer is answered, but in a very upside-down way.

It seems to me that whatever else prayer does, it changes our internal landscape. When I was 18 I made a major commitment of my life to God. (I did this by going to Woolworths on Monday morning and buying a rug and an alarm clock so as

to get up in the morning to pray). When I reflected that all this faith stuff was probably imaginary, I had three lines of defence:

1. As a historian I considered Mark's gospel as a reliable, effectively first-hand account of the ministry of Jesus; therefore presumably he did rise from the dead, therefore presumably God exists.
2. I found that when I prayed in the morning, I went through the day in a much more centred and effective way; I could not believe that the universe was so chaotic that one part of it worked better (i.e. me) on the basis of what was not in fact the case.
3. I deeply believed, and still believe, that I am *not* the summit of human spiritual achievement (as if!) – there are countless others who know more and better and deeper than me.

We talk as if we are talking to God (or Higher Power or Allah or the Eternal One), because talking is how we express ourselves, and we do that in the faith that *"closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet"*. (Tennyson)

As Mahatma Gandhi said, *"Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."*

But what can we do when our words are too thin?

Listening

Rabbi Lionel Blue wrote, *"Prayer is when God speaks to us."*
(To Heaven with Scribes and Pharisees)

This statement thrusts us into a radically new way of thinking about prayer. Our words become less significant, but the problem of prayer is intensified. If I cannot judge the significance of the words I actually say in prayer, how on earth can I say anything about the silence which is all I hear?

Feelings

It is possible that in prayer we experience strong feelings which we might interpret as the presence of God. But how can we distinguish between a communication from God to our inner self, and a self-manufactured emotion? Are we just indulging in self-hypnosis? As Dud said, *"It's difficult"*.

I remember hearing a story of St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582). One of her nuns rushed up to her in great excitement, saying *"Mother, I have just had a most wonderful experience of God's love while praying in the chapel!"* *"Never mind, my daughter,"* the saint replied. *"Go back to your prayers and it will soon go away."*

Thoughts

Perhaps God speaks within us, through our thoughts.

John Wimber, a remarkable American pastor who founded the Vineyard Churches and expected every Christian to pray for healing, encouraged everyone to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking to them. At one of his conferences I attended, he was asked what hearing the Holy Spirit was like. He replied, *"It's a hunch."*

This is similar to the concept of prayer set out in Alcoholics Anonymous. On p. 86 Bill Wilson wrote, *"On awakening let us think about the twenty-four hours ahead... In thinking about our day we may face indecision... Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy... We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while. What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind."*

My own experience is that several times I have received an answer to a problem through my thoughts while praying. The thought always seems to have a particular quality about it. A fresh idea comes to me, one that I had not thought of before, but once there it seems blindingly obvious. Either it is the Holy Spirit communicating in me, or else my subconscious is a much more interesting place than I had suspected.

Non-Thoughts

Finally there is the form of prayer which uses neither words nor feelings nor thoughts, a form of prayer which in the east is called meditation and in the western church contemplation. (At which point Dud and Pete walk off in disgust).

A classic description comes in *"The Cloud of Unknowing"*, an anonymous book written in the 14th century in Northamptonshire, England.

"When you first begin, you find only darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don't know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God. Do what you will, this darkness and this cloud remains between you and God... Reconcile yourself

to wait in this darkness as long as necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love.

“By love may he be gotten and holden; by thought never.”

This is comparable to some extent to Buddhist and Hindu meditation, and to the modern practice of mindfulness. They can be both a preparation for and a goal of prayer. My friend David Goymour reports:

“I have practised meditation for about 45 years. Practice is patchy; there have been patches when I have neglected it, but I have always come back to it... In the last 10+ years I have become increasingly aware that meditation is important to me, a spiritual anchor. The curious thing about it is that as I sit down and prepare myself to meditate, each time is unique. It always has a fresh, unexpected quality. It can be hard work, battling with the mind, keeping it fixed on the mantra. Sometimes it is just very natural. What you can't see is what it is doing in the central nervous system. At the end of the half hour, when I open my eyes, I almost invariably have a deeper sense of being myself. Philosophical writings from Plato onwards tell us that this immortal invisible consciousness is the Self. Meditation puts us in touch with the universal Self... As I continue to meditate, I get more and more convinced of the reality of Some Power greater than and beyond myself.”

Houston, we have a problem

The key problem with prayer is that we have a problem with it. As soon as we say to ourselves, *“I think I'll pray now”*, we (or at any rate, I) are/am faced with an immediate sense of reluctance. It's like starting the car and trying to drive it with

the handbrake on (as I have frequently tried to do – it doesn't work very well). It is, I believe, a common experience that as soon as I think about praying, a host of other thoughts crowd in – I need a cup of tea/coffee first; I need a bit more sleep; baby, it's cold outside; No! I've got too many things to do! and, What on earth am I doing?

The Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita (Song of God) has this wonderful verse:

*The mind is restless, Krishna, impetuous, self-willed, hard to train;
to master the mind seems as difficult as to master the mighty winds.*

(Bhagavad Gita ch.6 v. 34)

So we need a strategy.

Some strategies

When I was a teenager, and part of St Matthew's Youth Club in Rugby, the standard formula for prayer was ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. I tried it but did not find it too helpful – it all felt a bit forced for me.

One excellent strategy was told me by Robin Smith, a chaplain at Lee Abbey, a wonderful Christian holiday centre in North Devon – do Google it. I went to talk to him about how hard I found it to pray in any consistent way. His advice was *“Try to pray two minutes a day.”* I remember leaving, thinking, *“Huh, that's not much,”* but of course he was quite right. The way to avoid the poison of legalism is to have a rule that is an

invitation to go further, not a rule that one is constantly trying to achieve and either failing in, or succeeding in, with the risk of developing a pink glow of self-righteousness.

Around 1966 I visited the Mayflower Centre in East London, a flagship Christian community centre in a very deprived area of Canning Town. George Burton was the leader of the Centre from 1959 and a completely down-to-earth bloke, whose philosophy was summed up in the book he wrote, *“People Matter More Than Things”*. I heard him talk about prayer. *“If you don’t know what to pray, say the Lord’s Prayer. If you still don’t know what to pray, say it again – it’s the prayer Jesus gave us.”* Simple and easy advice which I appreciated, but one which I did not particularly practise.

A useful strategy, for those who are familiar with church, is that of St Anthony of the Desert. Anthony was born in Roman Egypt about 251 AD. When he was 18 both his parents died, leaving him a sister to look after. One Sunday he arrived late, in the middle of the gospel reading, (I relate to that), and heard the words of Jesus *“Go, sell everything you have, and give it to the poor.”* He felt that this was a word addressed directly to him. (It seems that God often uses the Bible to speak like this). He did just that. He sold everything, apart from what was needed to support his sister, and became a hermit, dedicating his life to prayer and moving eventually to the Egyptian desert. He lived to over a hundred, dying in 356. Shortly afterwards, St Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, wrote his life story. In it Anthony gives this advice to those wanting to live a spiritual life:

“Pray continually; avoid vain-glory, sing psalms before sleeping and on awaking.”

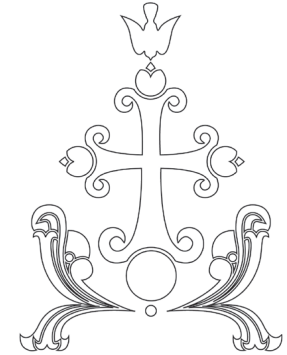
(Life of St Anthony by St Athanasius, section 55).

I have found this good advice. Though I do not sing psalms, there are a number of hymns that I can sing (quietly!) to commit the night to God and to welcome the morning, helping me to attune myself to the idea of praying.

The Bible is a great resource. Every time we open it we participate in a conversation between man and God, or between man and man about God. This can help take us out of our everyday concerns. This is especially true if we allow enough time to let the words resonate inside us. I assume other scriptures can do that as well, such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism, the Qu’ran of Islam; and the Dhammapada of Buddhism. All of these assert that there is One who is beyond this world and to whom we can open ourselves.

But none of these strategies I find work as well for me as that particular bit of the Bible called the Psalms.

Really?



“

“My experience over the years has taught me that the Morning Watch with God day by day is an unfailing secret of power, progress, purpose and peace.”

Jack C Winslow “When I Awake”.

Chapter 4

Bus-friendly Morning Prayer

The three psalms which are central to Syrian Orthodox morning prayers are psalms 51, 63 and 113.

Psalm 51 starts:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.*

The natural ending is at verse 17:

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Psalm 63 starts:

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you,
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

The natural ending is at verse 8:

*My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

Psalm 113 starts and continues with the theme of praise:

*Praise the Lord!
Praise, O servants of the Lord,
Praise the name of the Lord.*

For the first time in my life I encountered psalms as prayers which made immediate sense to me. These three psalms are a wonderful ladder, leading from confession through trust to praise. I started using them daily, and found that wherever I was spiritually, something in these three psalms would speak directly to my situation. And by using them every day, I quickly got to know them by heart. Within a fortnight I could pray them anywhere without the need of a book. My homeward journey to England started a fortnight after my visit to Kurisumala. I got an overnight coach from Madurai to Madras, a 12 hour journey, stopping every two or three hours for comort breaks. I managed to sleep from half past midnight to 5.00. I remember looking out of the slightly leaking window at the grey rainswept countryside when I woke, praying the three psalms by memory and feeling a real connection with God.

I finish each psalm with the standard Christian ending:

*Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and shall be for ever. Amen.*

I continued using Psalms 51:1-17, 63:1-8 and 113 every morning for the next two years. I did not get bored, but I felt that perhaps I should spread my wings a bit and use a wider range of psalms. Over a series of long coach journeys I combed the book of psalms for ones that would express the same emotional journey. I started with the six traditional psalms of repentance used in Roman Catholic liturgy and added some of the most well known psalms of trust such as psalms 27 and 103 (Robert Louis Stevenson's favourite). On Fridays I use two psalms which reflect Christ's crucifixion. In the end I had a fortnight's selection, which I have stuck with ever since. I aimed to balance the length of psalms so that each day's palms are roughly the same length, but every day they go through the same ladder of confession, trust and praise.

For instance, on Tuesday week 1 we move from Psalm 6:

*O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath...
My soul also is struck with terror,
while you, O Lord - how long?*

to Psalm 27:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? ...
Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path*