

was washing over me and I was falling deeper and deeper into worship until it was just me and God and I realised, 'This is it!'⁸

For Matt, the introductions began a journey which he is continuing five years later. Matt's personal faith experiences have lent their own credibility to the faith of those whom he sees living out their faith around him. He has watched and modelled prayer and worship from peers and role models in those five years. He has great potential for his faith and trust in Jesus to have a great ministry - if he dares to take up that path! Each of us needs to be given direction in finding how we can pray and hear from God. We need the witness and encouragement of a body of believers who are open and visible enough in their prayer and whole Christian lifestyle that they may be living witnesses to others who are discovering who they are in Christ.

My friend Shelley currently lives in Colorado Springs with her husband Chance and their baby, Jace. Over the years, she has inspired me with her devotion to making God as big in her life as he possibly can be. Her experience of prayer is a beautiful picture of a constantly running narrative throughout her day. This is built on years of experience and of knowing Jesus as her Saviour, and may well be, in some part, the result of her faith being rooted within a loving Christian family and generations of prayerful people who add depth to her faith. Here, we see how God has full access to the whole of Shelley's activities:

Inviting him to my fears, my joys, my questions more consistently than once a day sitting down and having a thirty minute solid prayer: "Here's all my prayers for the day" - check that off the list...

It's become more of a, "here it is - it's come on my mind - let's talk about it and here comes the next one - let's talk about it."

Bringing him into the fun things of life; "Isn't that a pretty flower!" or, "Isn't that a weird outfit that she has on!!"

Like, just talking to him and laughing and thinking about my thoughts being prayers versus just thoughts to myself, trying to turn them into conversation with God throughout the day. It's fun! And then he can convict me when I'm making fun of someone's outfit!⁹

We need to learn who we are as children of God. We need to properly understand that he is interested in the whole picture of that which makes us who we are. We are not limited to belonging to him only when we are at our most holy and prayerful and neither does he cease to matter to us when we are consciously switched off from him or not thinking of him.

Many of our troubles arise when we have forgotten to include God in the whole of our life and have made decisions without waiting for him shine the light of his approval onto them. Shelley reminds us that we do not need a set time, a designated location and a specific set of words as we come to God. She shows us that our intentions for coming to God and including him in the whole of our thinking and doing are good ways to make sure He is thoroughly included in every part of our daily life.

The initial introduction that we have with God is moved on to a new, deeper stage by a further introduction to prayer and praying. If the initial meeting is to have any relevance to us, then that introduction must mark the beginning of a relationship. We are better at

⁸ Matt Williams: Prayer and Worship

⁹ Shelley Riehl: The Fullness of God in the Whole of Life

being a Christian in some parts of our lives than in others. Our being kind to others as a witness to God's love may be easier to live out than the giving over of all our material resources to His service is an example of this ... It may also be that specific areas of temptation or struggle are less easy to live as God desires for us. It is better to acknowledge that we are in constant dialogue with our Heavenly Father throughout the day, intentionally open to his scrutiny and delight than to restrict our view of Him to a couple of set times within the day, when we are on our best behaviour.

Matt continues his story with reference to his role models for prayer and Christian lifestyle. He acknowledges that, in himself, there wasn't a ready to use pattern for his faith and that he needed to find the elements of faith and good practise that would make his faith work for him and equip him for personal growth and maturity in Christ.

*People who are the same age as you are going to offer you the support, but then those who are older, I think for me anyway, people like Emile (youth leader) showed a lot of passion. Another reason that led to my becoming a Christian was seeing their passion for God and wanting that myself.*¹⁰

Matt is now 17 and his faith has grown considerably since those early days of introduction. He has not got a background in Church, nor a childhood baseline of Biblical knowledge. He does not bring with him a learnt understanding of prayer which has been passed down through generations of Christian parents and grandparents. He has Christian peers in his youth group at Church. He has his minister and a whole series of older teens to whom he can look for example. Without this support and modelling of good practise and encouragement when his faith is not bearing fruit, Matt's faith would have had the real potential of atrophy and dying.

We learn to pray through copying the good practise of others and in allowing their prayers and support to see us through the dry, tough, or complicated times that life puts in our way. The first introductions to faith in God, for people who are seeking faith, also need a credible follow-up by responsible and prayer-fuelled leaders.

We pray according to the level of faith that we have been given and respond to God with a level of trust that befits our experience, circumstance and personality. Some people find it really easy to place the fullness of their trust onto God for every situation, and this can be very humbling to watch. Claire, whom I've known for 17 years, has always had a beautiful innocence to her faith. She lacks any form of cynicism when she prays to God and is absolute in her conviction that he will answer her. She and Phil have two lovely sons whom they know are a blessing from God. Samuel, their first baby, was a precarious pregnancy and yet Claire was complete in her conviction that God would bring her and her baby safely through it, which he did. Recently, whilst pregnant with little Nathan, Claire became really sick. She never wavered in her conviction that God had his hand upon her and her child and that he would bring it all together for good. I have learned humility from Claire, in her openness to God's power in her life. She is human in her frustrations with the world, but will then go to great lengths to ensure that her relationship is right with God;

I trust him more, but I still have that childlike faith; that if I know that I ask God, then I know that he'll be there - and I know I'll maybe not get my own way, because I know that often when you pray that God changes your mind as well as

¹⁰ Matt Williams: Prayer and Worship

your outcome. But I've got that childlike faith that everything will be alright. It might not be what I want, but it will be alright and that God's there. I see it as a kind of gifting in a way.¹¹

Claire's prayers are the ones which invite grace to occupy the space in your life that you can't quite understand how to fill. She was in considerable pain during her pregnancy with Nathan, but invited God's presence to be her comfort and protection. She and her husband, Phil prayed regularly for Claire's bodily protection and for their unborn little one. She asked me to pray for her towards the end of her pregnancy with Nathan and although her need was obvious and critical, she insisted on praying for my needs too. It may be childlike, but this faith which Claire demonstrates every day is awesome in its practical potency. God's power is alive in her. She exudes his grace. As a role model, she has a lot to offer Christians of all generations and experience.

Due to faith in Jesus, his followers are looked to by other people. It may be for wisdom and advice, or to see how our love for him might help us to handle stress through pressure of work, redundancy or bereavement. In following Jesus, we should be living out a life of holiness. This does not always go according to plan however. We may even be able to offer better advice on how to pray than we regularly model ourselves, due to our poor resolve to live out the way of life with Christ that is best for us: we know the theory but fall short in its outliving.

As St Paul says: *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing.* (Romans 7:19 NIV)

We have to be careful here, as it is a fine line between striving and intending to honour God through worship, prayer and lifestyle, and a hypocrisy of having all the equipment and patter that would point to our having faith and yet somehow falling short and never quite living it.

Christians of many years' commitment may well know how to live and pray. We know that, in order to grow, we must read the Bible and be in fellowship with other Christians. We may be utterly convinced of the value of regular and sincere worship. However, we may also fall short of the good that they would do due to poor habit, sinful patterns that have crept in over the years and through keeping company with others who do not encourage excellence in their prayer and Bible study. The theory is solid, but it needs to be used in order to be effective.

Paul's observation applies to us all, and it is only through such closeness in our relationship with God as Shelley describes that he is able to 'convict us' and lead us to change our behaviour to that which is more Godly when we have fallen into sinful practice.

Other people can help us to use the Bible to properly understand our position and our role within the Kingdom of God. They can help us to see ourselves as co-heirs with Christ, as royalty who are redeemed and precious to God. They can assist us in accepting that we are worthless in sin certainly, but then to be so happily radiant in redemption through Jesus. We often focus hard on the worthless bit. Or we get carried away by salvation and forget that we have fallen short of God's best for us. Being part of a group of Christians for whom always making the right choice doesn't come easily is a good and healthy place for a modern day disciple to find themselves.

The modelling of good prayer, should be found within the local church community. Sadly, it is not always the people who have been attending church for the longest time who have

¹¹ Claire Jackson

the greatest insight into guiding others to pray. For some, the promise of a developed prayer-life has been there, only to remain unfulfilled. Years of habit, often formed in the early days of faith and grown, can be hard to breathe life into in order to cause opportunities to explore new heights of prayer. When I asked Chance about his experiences of group praying at Church, he had a well thought-through picture to share with me:

My frustration is that when it comes to group prayer, people zip up their 'prayer suit'. They have a certain personality, or mannerisms, or way of speaking when they pray instead of just being themselves. When someone says, 'let us pray' people change as the group makes their, what I've come to call, Christian Shift. Men bow their heads and rest their hands on their knees and women have their own manoeuvre, and then it begins ... It's routine.¹²

This style of prayer breeds! It is human nature to seek a teacher, a worthy person whose example we can copy until we find our own way. In the absence of any other influence, a new believer may see the members of Chance's prayer group as the benchmark. The new believer will copy the style and phrases that the group uses, affecting similar mannerisms and posture until they are confident that they have learnt the correct and acceptable way to pray.

Families teach each other their good habits and their bad habits too! If you look at how your own family culture has developed a ritual or routine around mealtimes, you will see how this works. The meal may begin with a setting of the table and everyone at work in the kitchen before washing hands and sitting down to eat together, the meal preceded by a 'grace' and it will be a time of conversation about the day's events. Other households will be called into the kitchen or dining room when all is ready, eat and go off immediately after to do their own thing. Others may have meals presented to them on a tray in front of the TV. It seems normal when you are in it, but to visit someone else's routine causes you to question and evaluate your own.

We pass on our mannerisms in prayer to the people around us. We are as likely to teach bad habits as life-giving methods of praying. For Chance and for so many others, a prayer group has become a 'sacred thing' toward which suggestion or criticism may not be directed. This allows the charade to go unchecked and unhappily, the prayer-suit wearers continue to demonstrate that the image they portray when doing prayer is more important than the attitude of their hearts or the actual content.

The groups Chance describes are prevalent in many churches and fellowships. They look like they would be a good place to learn from others, but effectively stunt a new believer's growth through the self prescribed limits of expectation and practise. Add to the mix Chance's bugbear, 'Bob' and the method of discovering God's heart through group prayer becomes even more distorted;

Bob will pray for at least 10 minutes and everyone will stop praying and wish he would stop too! He uses the same type of words or phrase for whatever topic the prayer is about. It is a formula. A good example is when [people such as] Bob tells God about a situation in prayer;

"Susie's having hard time right now and you love her and know what is happening. She has come here to us at church and would like help. She has two daughters, Sarah and Shirley, who are a lot of work. She loves her daughters, but they are a

¹² Chance Riehl on Prayer

lot of work for her.”

He is fishing for filler, talking as though to a human who isn't omniscient... Don't waste time for seeking God's will and waiting on his answers by catching him up on the story which he's already writing.¹³

Copying other people in prayer is a huge responsibility. There should be a quality of prayer within the church which is worthy of being copied and also a desire to learn good techniques for prayer. 'Teach us to pray!' is the cry of the believer's heart to the elders in their fellowship. It is a serious indictment on the church that so many of their groups pray in bizarrely unhelpful ways. However, the Church should take seriously the need for good quality prayer guidance and provide teaching and modelling of how this could be done more effectively. Every praying person needs to take note of this, as Bob believes he doesn't need any help praying and kills the group. There are tendencies to behave like Bob within many of us which, with a little grace and learning, could be re-channelled for good quality prayer group contributions. We always need competent people to copy, even when we have many years of experience. To dominate with our well-intentioned and lengthy stories-in-prayer is not acceptable and leads to a frustrated group!

The quirks of habit are also passed around within groups. We pick up the dominant trend. At home, dad had dogs which went to work with him. He spent each day working in the forest and was frequently alone. The first dogs he had were terriers. They were feisty and would bark an alarm at passing strangers or vehicles. It was a cry of protection for him. Each generation of dog that worked with dad picked up this habit, regardless of breed and nature. It was passed on as the generations overlapped. It was not always appropriate, however, as they would also use their noisiness to full effect when parked on a residential street or when quietness would be preferential!

We can always use some self-evaluation when it comes to how we set the example for others. Are we blessing them with bad habits, or are we encouraging a 'learn from me, but be selective' opportunity? The 'Bobs' don't mean to bore the group, but could benefit from a little grace to be quiet and listen, to stop fishing for things to tell God and to let their hearts be filled with the love of God for Susie and her family.

Bob was probably taught this manner of praying by a Bob Senior. The prayer-suit wearers joined a group or a church where this was what you did to fit in, and so zipped up a suit of their own, never questioning whether they really needed to wear it, because for them, not wearing the prayer-suit was never an option. The new person in the group could benefit from having a trusted mentor who can steer them through some of the pitfalls and issues that come with developing a prayer-relationship with God.

When learning to pray, we need to be taught by a 'mentor' who is full of God's love and the Holy Spirit as well as being someone whose faith we respect. We need to find our areas of strength where sin is more easily resisted within us and to be mature in our response to those areas of weakness where sin is constantly seeking to overwhelm us and drag us into the void of separation from God. We need to discover how to pray for ourselves and on behalf of others in order to have a functioning prayer-life.

One of the most important things we can learn from others is how to hear God's voice. It may be that we have forgotten to listen for God in the busy lives we lead, or simply have the understanding that he no longer speaks to this generation. My experiences have led

¹³ Chance Riehl on Prayer

me to believe that the Living God is interested and active in our lives and speaks his plan, his authority, correction or assurance into us as we need it.

When I was a new Christian, I had attended a Christian Holiday Conference on the South coast of England. I clearly remember standing in the reception area, next to the covered up slot machines (covered to eliminate any temptation to gamble, I believe). I was looking through the open doors out to sea, when the words came into my mind; "I have called you to be my preacher and my minister". I was 17 years old and as flaky as any teenager in my choices, but this word had a different quality to it than the many good ideas that floated through my mind on a daily basis. I told my friends. I ran it past my parents. I summoned the local Church minister and requested that I begin to train as a preacher, to which he responded; 'are you sure you're not called to teach Children's Sunday School?' I was sure, and the preachers in the local area began to watch over me and to determine my competence and calling as I trained. Five years later, I remembered the second part of the word: 'You will be my minister'. I had, that day, attended interview for an assistant pastoral role within a church in the North East of England, and the minister phoned me to offer the post. He followed on with the phrase, "We will organise for you to offer for the ministry whilst you're here". God's word within me was stirred up by the discerning word of another who affirmed that now was the time to act.

Years later, I would ask God, 'Why me?' To this, I heard the clear response arrive in my mind, and can hear it now with gentle, unshakable authority: "I have called you because I trust you."

He places people in my path for me to guide into fullness of life in him and to find their calling. I know I am trusted.

Other Christians have said that they are more sure of it being God's voice speaking when they hear something they couldn't have put into that particular form of words, but yet it is clear and understandable to them. Others will describe it as a quiet conviction or a peace within their spirit, accompanying a decision or thought pattern.

I had checked with other Christians whether what I believed God was saying had a ring of truth to it. The Christian tradition to which I belong offers scope for me to fulfil the calling I believed I had heard. These checks are important as we learn to hear God's voice. Trusting that it is God's voice comes with experience, often surprising us by taking us in a wholly unexpected direction with our thinking or planning. These situations are often confirmed as being God's voice when a third party comments on how helpful or timely the response to the word was for them. God's word is always with us and acts as a check against more unhelpful and life-distorting words that may enter our consciousness.

Shelley, again offers some really sensible and heartfelt advice to all of us on this subject.

I struggled for a long time with 'is this thought from God or is this thought from ... I'll just go with 'nervous times'?

When I'm anxious, or I'm upset or maybe I've thought, "Is this conviction or am I condemned?"

It's knowing and beginning to discern my way through things: Is this bringing me peace and comfort as an escape, or is this bringing panic, anxiety, fear, doubt? And beginning to separate and acknowledge and point out where this thought is coming from. If it brings condemnation, or if it makes me feel worse or more fearful or less hopeful, then I usually know this is Not a thought from God.

I believe that if I have a thought that's coming from the outside, It's going to come from two places:

-It's either from God

-Or it's gonna be Not from God ...

So therefore, claiming them for what they are, and not letting them just run in my thoughts in letting my thoughts go with it, but claim it first for what it is and label it and then allow it to have influence on my life. Before, I would get really panicky and run with things, but now I focus on not allowing myself to dwell on that which is not worthy to dwell on, claiming it for what it is - a lie or just an emotion, a wave of emotion. This has really helped, because I used to have lots of deep anxiety.¹⁴

Because much of our praying is done within our heart, we have no window to reveal what else is going on inside us. Shelley reminds us that there can be insecurities and emotions which may come, disguised as a word of truth. Taking time to properly weigh what we believe to be true through running it under the scanner of 'Does this fit with God's character? Does this make sense to my Christian friends?' can help us to evaluate where the word is from. Although God may need to correct us, he will do this without destroying us! His character IS Love.

Copying the way others live as Christians can be hugely challenging to us. I have friends who model the Biblical principles of tithing and giving with grace and sincerity, others who readily demonstrate, at great personal cost, the value which Jesus places on the little children and I know others who are willing to lay self aside with their potential of money and fame, for the promotion of God's glory. This is humbling to watch, but is also challenging to the spirit within me.

It causes me to be challenged about what God is requiring of my heart and life; where I should serve, whom I should meet, what I should do. Copying the practises of our Christian friends may well lead us to different outcomes. However, finding the path that God has called us to follow him along usually happens most successfully through carefully heeding the guidance of others who are on their own faith journey.

We need also to be taught by Jesus. A Christian mentor can help us to do this as they explain and demonstrate the activity of prayer in their own lives and can act as a check against some of the crazier ideas we may get about what God may be saying. I have found that the best way forward, in this imprecise area of hearing from God, is through working with competent Christian mentors whose prayer-lives and credibility are transparent and who are in good standing within their own church as part of the body of Christ.

Being taught to pray also requires a credible input from people who are mature in their faith. People who have practised the discipline of prayer over time have a greater insight into how best to approach God, how to become immersed in his presence and to know how to understand the promptings that come from God through prayer. Sometimes, these insights can take years of learning as pieces of our lives are put together in careful reassembly from our brokenness. Other people have to learn fast, when incidents happen within their lives that accelerate the process of learning and understanding.

Learning the ways of prayer from a person who has battled some of the issues, prayed their way through a variety of tough situations and learnt to trust that they hear God is of immeasurable value. They can more easily see the self-made issues which rise up in front of us as insurmountable problems and are able to help us to see them as the insubstantial facades that they are. The seasoned person of prayer can guide us in listening to God and in trusting his promptings. The gentle, or even frank and up front guidance of such a Christian mentor can be an invaluable aid to learning how to pray. The disciples copied

¹⁴ Shelley Riehl: Fullness of God in the Whole of Life

Jesus, and we learn to pray when we copy those who closely follow him today.

Chapter 5 We Really Do Need To Be Quiet!

During Lent, Gavin and I put the TV away in the airing cupboard and our home took on a whole new atmosphere! There was still the local radio station rumbling on with incessant football commentary in the kitchen where I have no jurisdiction, but still, there was a pervasive quietness that allowed for more space to talk to each other. No TV also meant that distractions from praying were reduced. There was an honesty about the time we spent with each other as the TV did not provide camouflage for family time during which I would often be working, the fact disguised by no visible evidence of work taking place and my physical presence being with everyone else, even though my mind was dealing with other things and I wasn't really fully present with my family. It was a good lesson: if we are being together, we should make it count and similarly if we are being with God, we should definitely make it count.

Being quiet is not something that comes easily to most people! We are constantly surrounded by noise of various sorts. Usually, the TV or radio provide a constant background with entertainment and advertising. There's the rumble of the motorway, main road or bus route; the dull drone of machinery on building site or factory; the buzz of electrical appliances at work in our homes or the chatter of people going about their daily life. Even when camping in the remote places of the British countryside, there are plenty of nature's noises to keep you company.

For some personalities, it is completely frightening to be quiet; there is an awkwardness in silence that is alien and unwelcome. For others, this quietness is a beautiful Utopian idyll, wherein a deep sense of peace can be achieved.

Quietness with God is not absence of noise. It is the decision to stop giving our attention to the things that distract our attention from him and to be focussed in prayer.

Why stop? Can't we just get on with our lives and be content that God is there? It would be easy to let this one go and say, 'you know you're a Christian and so does God, so there's a done deal...'

However, in prayer, the pauses or waiting can allow God to show us things about our life or our situation that we would have otherwise skipped over. It is in these pauses that we discover beauty and find the detail that help us to understand or to appreciate more about the bigger picture..

We can take our cues from nature on this: a sunset is gazed upon, not glanced at. A view is taken in, not skimmed for the general effect. The truly amazing things need to be savoured to be properly appreciated and understood.

I grew up in the beautiful Yorkshire coastal village of Fylingthorpe. At the time it was ordinary, simply *the place where I lived*. There were fields, cliffs and the sea within a mile or so of our house and I would often venture out for walks along a variety of routes through woodland, along cliff top or next to the sea on the rocky beach. However, it wasn't until I was living in Birmingham that the true beauty of my childhood home took on any meaning.

How had I not noticed the tiny paved streets with precariously balanced 3 storey houses?
How had I not tasted the quality of the fresh sea air?

The valley filled with old woodland trees shading a tiny river became a treasure.

The space and light of the open countryside leading to the crumbling cliffs invited feet to stamp across and make a print into the fresh clay of unpaved nature.

Busily living in the place, I had not understood its charm. With fresh eyes and a desire to appreciate it, the area- no more nor less beautiful than before- came alive to my senses