



PRAYER WITHOUT
PRETENCE

Natasha Langford

A WOMAN WHO
PRAYS

Ellen Barns

A BEEF WITH
BUFFY

Michelle Coulter

THE BACKSLIDING
BLUES

Catherine de Fontenay



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

In putting together this issue of ishah, we wanted to encourage our readers to think anew about prayer and to become more prayerful. As Christians, we know that prayer is vital to a life that is obedient and effective for God. But the reality of our prayer life rarely measures up to our belief about the centrality of prayer. So while we often feel twinges of guilt, daily concerns like paying the bills, meeting work deadlines and cooking the dinner take over our thinking.

So what should we do about our lack of prayer? It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking of prayer as though it was one more demand on our time, yet another addition to that overflowing mental to-do list. We can get bogged down in our own inadequacies and stop talking to God. The writers for this issue remind us of God's great kindness and compassion toward us and toward the people we are praying for. We act as though God thinks "Oh no, not you again" when we come to confess our sins yet again or to continue to ask him to work in this world. Instead, he longs to hear us pray, for our prayers are like incense to him (Revelations 5:8). He longs for us to live out the reality of the close relationship that Christ died to achieve.

We hope that this issue of ishah with its practical tips and inspirational examples will encourage you to pray. We hope that these stories will help you to "have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4: 6-7)

The Editors

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 10:

Fearfully and wonderfully made:
Thinking about bioethics

ISSUE 11:

Tough calls:
Difficult decisions in a difficult world

our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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PRAYER WITHOUT PRETENCE

BY NATASHA LANGFORD

Lack of prayer is a major source of guilt in the lives of many Christian women. We usually blame laziness, poor planning, or a lack of "spirituality" for our prayerlessness. Yet I think that it often stems from a failure to deeply understand God's character, especially his parental love for us as His daughters.

Prayerlessness in my own life has usually been driven by misunderstandings of who God is and what He is like. There are three "mind-traps" I've fallen into during years of struggling to pray, which I'll describe, explaining how God has addressed each of them through His word.

► I'm Not Good Enough to Pray

In one sense this is true: if it were not for Jesus' death in our place, God would be justified in destroying us whenever we approached Him. Yet we've been saved from experiencing God's anger. Paul explains this idea to the Thessalonians - "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that...we may live together with Him" (1 Thessalonians 5: 9-10).

The purpose of Jesus' death is clearly spelt out by Paul - we have been saved from God's anger and brought into relationship with Him. We "live together with Jesus". Our wrongdoings need not get in the way of relating to God - we can tell Him about them honestly, trusting in His forgiveness, and praise Him from the heart in the moments when we grasp just how merciful He has been to us.

Sometimes the "I'm not good enough" mind-trap is associated more with a general sense of guilt and worthlessness, than with any identifiable sin. Yet the feelings we might have about ourselves are wildly out of step with God's view of us. John describes God's feelings toward us like this - "How great the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1)

God lavishes love on us! Grasping the depth of God's Fatherly love may involve some personal re-education, however. All parents are sinful; no person

alive receives perfect care and nurture from their parents. Many of us will have felt at times that love is something to be earned rather than received. Yet God cares for us perfectly, providing us with completely unconditional love. His view of us is perfect, despite any perceptions we might have of ourselves. He is not threatened or angry over our imperfections, sins and failings. We can go to Him in prayer in absolute security, knowing His perfect love and acceptance.

► The Manner in Which I Pray Determines the Success of My Prayers

At times I have turned myself inside-out trying to pray genuine, sincere prayers, with just the right amount of selflessness and personal repentance. I've believed that God would only forgive me if I confessed with sorrow in my heart, and that He would only grant what I prayed for in response to the right kind of request. These ideas run directly against the grain of God's revelation of Himself. He forgives us because of His decision to send Jesus to die on our behalf, not because of anything we do. Sincere repentance will no more secure my forgiveness than any other good work. God's love is not for sale! Likewise, the success of my intercessions does not depend on the eloquence or form of my prayers. Such a view reduces God to a cosmic vending machine: find the right change and you get the product you desire.

God is far greater than any machine! He is our good and loving Father. As we would expect from a truly loving parent, we cannot manipulate Him into giving us exactly what we want by reciting the correct incantation. Instead God listens to our prayers and provides us with all we need according to His great wisdom (Matthew 6:8, 33; Luke 11:1-3). We don't always desire the best for ourselves. It's actually a relief to discover that God isn't constrained to deliver everything we ask for.

► There is No Point Praying Because God Does Not Answer My Prayers

Anyone who has prayed for any length of time will know that God does not always perform according to our expectations. We begin to question: why am I

stuck in a job I hate? Why don't I have a husband? Will my children ever become Christians? Why did my friend die? Our needs feel pressing and urgent, but God seems to be running to another agenda altogether. Peter instructed some Christians in the first century who were going through a very hard time with the following words: "Humble yourselves therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5: 6-7).

We are to acknowledge God's sovereign control of our lives humbly. If we have a false picture of God's character this will seem very harsh, yet a knowledge of God's goodness and love will enable us to live in trust under Him. The above verses contain a promise of restoration - God will lift us up in due time.

On a bad day, I find it very hard to be patient, humble and trusting. I'd rather throw questions and accusations at God. Does He really care? Is He just peering down from the sky and watching us squirm? It's comforting that Peter concludes by telling us to go to God with all our anxiety (1 Peter 5: 7).

God knows that this life is hard on us, that we struggle and suffer and fail. He is not an unloving dictator, but rather a wise parent who cares for us. God wants to hear our anxiety, confusion and concerns. He won't be shocked if we express our anger and dismay to Him when life isn't panning out as we would like.

Some of the best prayer advice I ever received came from a missionary I met when I was living in Austria. She had returned to visit a church she invested in heavily a number of years before and discovered it in a mess. Numbers were shrinking, there was no pastor and the leadership was being torn apart by internal bickering. She was in despair over the situation. "The only thing I can do is be honest before the Lord," she said. Her words stuck with me. I'd never before considered that honesty with God was either desirable or attainable. I decided to "try God out", and began telling Him what I really thought and felt. This opened the door to a much richer prayer relationship with God.

Such honesty is available to all who trust Jesus - we're God's children, secure in relationship with Him. Ask Him now to help you know His love and care for you better and better, and to grow you in trusting and responding to Him in prayer.

■ *Natasha Langford works with the Melbourne University Christian Union and studies theology part-time at Ridley College. She attends St. Jude's Anglican Church in Carlton. She can be contacted at nlangford@cu.org.au*

SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS...

- > Find or make times when you can talk to God honestly. Don't set your sights too high - this isn't about attaining God's favour, it's about growing in relationship with him.
- > Talk to God in the car or on public transport.
- > Have lunch by yourself once a week and use the time to talk to God.
- > Develop the habit of shooting up prayers to God in awkward or difficult situations.
- > Practice turning negative thoughts and criticisms into on the spot prayers.
- > Keep your prayer requests manageable – try writing the names of people and concerns on cards, and pray for four to eight at a time.
- > If concentration is a problem, write or speak your prayers.
- > Use Bible passages to form and shape your prayers - the Psalms are a great place to start.
- > Find someone else to pray with.
- > Record what you pray for and look back over it to see how God has been at work.
- > Use words and expressions you're comfortable with - God understands you perfectly.
- > Meet regularly with a couple of friends to chat and pray for each other and other people. This could be weekly over coffee or less frequently over lunch. Keep a diary especially for less frequent meetings. It becomes a great record of God's goodness and your growth.

We thank Natasha Langford and Fran Boydell for composing these hints and tips.

A WOMAN WHO PRAYS

BY ELLEN BARNES

There are many women who pray, but in my community a very special woman has prayed for hundreds of people through childhood, adolescence, study, careers, marriage, childbirth, child rearing and beyond. Now a retired school principal, these days Jan¹ has a little more time on her hands. However even in the midst of the demands of her various roles, she has always been an inspiring model and practitioner of ongoing, committed intercessory prayer.

Jan says she learned how to pray as a teenager from her Scripture Union leaders, who prayed constantly in the midst of all their activities. Once a week they would drive to a nearby country town to run a meeting for young people. As they drove they would talk to God, bringing Him their concerns, voicing their praise. Prayer was considered a natural and essential part of their activities.

Given these beginnings, it's not surprising that a lot of Jan's prayer "happens on the hoof". But she is also committed to setting aside specific time to pray. She says she found this particularly important during her years as a school principal – with so much to do each day it was easy to let prayer slip.

What is amazing is the number of people Jan regularly prays for. So how does she decide or know who to pray for? Jan says the place to start is with the people you know you have been given to pray for. She prays for these peo-

ple every day. To help her keep track she has developed a number of aids. Her kitchen photo board and fridge are covered with photos of friends, children of friends and, in some cases, their children's children. "Seeing them reminds me to pray," she said. New photos are added as circumstances change. Sometimes a crisis develops and prayer needs change – such as the young couple on the board who were expecting quads. A photo of them coming out of hospital with their three surviving babies has now been added to the collection. Jan says she will now pray for them through the crisis of sleepless nights and all the stress associated with very young children.

She also uses the telephone and a calendar as aids to prayer. As people ring Jan fills in the calendar with important dates – who is travelling when, who is getting married, having a baby, starting a new job, having an operation. She also keeps a notebook next to the phone for jotting down needs or requests. "I find now that I pray for people straight away; having prayed once I find that I am prompted to pray again," she said.

Recuperation after recent surgery gave Jan additional time to pray. The forced rest allowed her time to organise her notebook, recording prayer requests under different headings - church, healing, general, long term, immediate etc. "It's not a matter of keeping lists however," Jan said. "It's about ongoing communication with God and including God in all the events of the day."

"Jesus has called us to walk with Him. The bottom line is not the length of time you pray but the orientation to pray. In most cases we don't see the fruits of prayer in an instant. It may take a lifetime but we are called to go on praying and to wait."

How does she know what to pray for? Jan acknowledges that a lot of her praying is intercessory, often crisis prayer. "It's like placing people in the sunshine of Christ's grace," she said. "Sometimes you feel the call to pray for someone and you don't know what to pray or sometimes even why you're praying. So you name the person before the Lord and stay there with them for a while. Other times the need is clear."

"But intercessory prayer is only one kind of prayer," she said. "It is also important to develop prayer that focuses on God for who He is and to delight in worshipping Him. This is where the Psalms, other Scripture and the use of liturgical readings can be really helpful."

Jan does not always pray alone. She also prays regularly for a young man who has cancer with a small group of people. She says they have a sense of being like the friends of the paralytic man in Luke who let their friend down through the roof to lay him before Jesus. "Praying with a prayer partner is also invaluable - to pray with someone you can trust and who will pray for you in a way you cannot pray for yourself."

Jan lives with a firm knowledge that "cooperating with God in prayer" is the most important work she does. What an amazing gift for the kingdom is a person who prays – who knows what impact they are having?

1. We have honoured Jan's wish not to be further identified.

■ *Ellen Barnes teaches English as a second language at a secondary school in Western Australia and attends Mt Pleasant Uniting Church. She is married to Ian and has three adult children. She has known Jan for more than forty years as pupil, colleague and friend and interviewed her for this article.*

BY MICHELLE COULTER

Buffy. A blonde American "everywoman"- school counselor by day and stake-wielding vampire slayer by night. Drawn into regular viewing by a few close friends who found the show irresistible, last year I found myself swept into the Buffy tangle. Occasionally, I felt slight twinges of guilt - should I be devoting so much time to a show enamored of witchcraft, filled with almost constant blaspheming and idealisation of premarital sex? Despite these dilemmas, the show dealt with some meaty issues and thanks to some parallels to the gospel provided opportunities to share about Christ with some friends. In response to these twinges, I usually told myself "no longer under law - saved by grace", paired with a conviction that it was okay to continue with Buffy as I was endeavoring to "becom(e) all things to all people", to share the gospel. These thoughts continued until one episode last season, where Buffy and another character engaged in a sexual act completely opposite to everything our Lord created sex to be. It was violent, undertaken in anger and performed out of marriage. As a woman created in God's image - knowing that God created these acts to be good - I found myself incensed at the twisted take on these events. At this point, I went cold turkey. Although the former points remained true, I could no longer come before God in prayer and reconcile this show with Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to think about "whatever is true...noble...right...pure...lovely...admirable" (Philippians 4:8).

As Christian women, we daily face similar battles. While it is important that we prayerfully make efforts to build relationships with those who have not yet understood the gospel and that we enjoy the good things of being in this world, we must first answer to God. It's a juggling act - we are saved by grace, but that is not to be exploited. We were bought at a price and are exhorted to "live a life worthy of (our) calling" (Ephesians 4:1). So I gave up Buffy. The surprise was, I had more conversations with people about why I wasn't watching the show, than when I was.

Am I watching Buffy now? Well, yes. After checking with a number of friends regarding the current series' content, and finding that my new, non-Christian flatmate loved to watch the show, I began watching again. The difference this time around is I don't *have* to watch. I can still chat to my friends about those crazy stake-wielding antics, but whether I see it or not doesn't worry me. As my flatmate knows, if events take certain turns, I simply leave the room and don't finish the episode. She respects that and it has "set me apart" when chatting to friends at work about episodes. Bottom line? As with most other elements of pop-culture, the aim of the show is not to bring honour and glory to God and needs to be approached with this in mind. On the whole, however, Buffy provides an amusing, generally satirical hour of entertainment - and some great opportunities to talk about the issues it raises.

■ *Michelle Coulter is currently working as an Occupational Therapist at La Trobe Regional Hospital. While in Traralgon, she enjoys fellowship with the Baptist Church there.*

SOME HELPFUL BOOKS...

> There are a couple of books you may find useful – try John Mallison's *Mentoring to Develop Disciples and Leaders* (Open Book, Chatswood, 1998). There is a good description of God's character on pages 25 – 28 which provides a great encouragement to trust him in prayer. You may also find D.A. Carson's *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* useful (Baker, Michigan, 1992).

The Backsliding Blues

BY CATHERINE DE FONTENAY

I've had the "backsliding blues" about prayer many times in my life. I pray regularly for a while, and then I stop because I'm busy, or I can't concentrate, or I can't hear God speaking to me. And then shame keeps me from returning to prayer.

The question is, then, when we have fallen off the wagon, lost our momentum and our discipline, what gets us back into regular prayer? Believe it or not, the tenth chapter of book of Hebrews is what does it for me. After I studied this passage, I found that whenever I thought of it, I turned to God with a renewed determination.

Why Hebrews? We struggle to maintain our prayer life, and the Hebrews struggled to maintain their commitment to Christ. They were early Jewish converts, who had been joyful and courageous at conversion (Hebrews 10:32-34), but were finding it harder and harder to continue. In this letter, their pastor reminds them of how much they gained by becoming Christians – and what they would lose by giving up.

First he shows that Jesus is greater than the prophets, the angels, Abraham, even Moses. He then shows that the sacrifice of Jesus is greater than the ongoing sacrifices offered by the priests in the temple, which are unable to fully cleanse people from their sin. By sacrificing himself on the cross, Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice for our sins (Hebrews 10:11).

Let's not forget that the purpose of sacrifice was to make it possible for us to have relationship with God. Yet under the sacrificial system, only the high priest could approach the innermost temple sanctuary, and then only as the representative of the people, offering sacrifice for them once a year. But the death of Jesus allowed us all to approach anytime, symbolically tearing down the temple curtain (Matthew 27:51),

and instituting a direct new way to God, himself (John 14:6; Ephesians 2:13). The culmination comes in verses 19-22.

Therefore my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh) and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water... (Hebrews 10:19-22)

If Jesus has gone through crucifixion so that we can approach God, then let us approach. Staying away is a terrible rejection and insult.

What has all this got to do with prayer? Prayer is first and foremost entering into the presence of God. If I only turn to God during Sunday services, on every other day I am rejecting the offer to meet the Lord of the universe. I found that I couldn't think of those words and at the same time turn away from prayer. "Jesus sacrificed Himself, poured out His blood to open a door so that I could approach Him, but I don't think I'll approach today". You just can't say that to yourself.

This passage also corrects my misunderstanding of prayer. In the past I have become disillusioned with prayer if I don't feel like I'm "getting somewhere". I want to feel God's presence, hear Him, and see prayers answered quickly! Yet this passage makes it clear that praying is primarily a response to what Jesus Christ has done for us. That's it. All we have to do is not turn our back on the gift of being allowed to approach God - approach!

Lastly, it becomes clear that prayer is primarily about worship - entering the sanctuary of God and being at His feet. God wants us to bring Him our needs and concerns. But more than anything, we've been freed by the sacrifice of Jesus to do what every angel in heaven does - to approach, to be with God, and to rejoice. So let us approach.

■ Catherine de Fontenay is a member of St Jude's Anglican Church, Carlton. Catherine is a lecturer in economics at the University of Melbourne. She's originally from the USA; the Bible study of Hebrews she refers to took place at Grace Fellowship Community Church in San Francisco.

write of reply

ishah welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed (to ishahmag@hotmail.com) or posted (to *ishah*, c/- 23 Bundoran Parade, Mont Albert North VIC 3129).

I have just finished reading the issue on Grief. The honest and moving accounts of the various writer's struggles in dealing with grief are extremely moving and encouraging. The determination to cling to Christ even in the midst of very tragic and difficult circumstances is a lesson to us all, many of whom have already experienced loss or will certainly do so in the future. Keep up the good work.

Thank-you,

Andrew Canobi
Mount Waverly, VIC

SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS...

- > Sometimes it seems appropriate to offer to pray for a colleague in need or even a stranger.
- > People who don't profess to believe are often grateful that you do and verbalising your intentions puts God on your joint agenda.
- > Pray with people over the phone.
- > Get in the habit of offering to pray with your children when they express their concerns. This is a habit that will be difficult (but not impossible) to establish in their teenage years. Teenagers who pray with their parents think to pray with others.
- > Try praying with friends you have been having dinner with at the end of the evening.
- > Some people find it helpful to walk together when they pray (but perhaps not to run...)

We thank Natasha Langford and Fran Boydell for composing these hints and tips.

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

Silent Cries

Outrage against child sexual abuse is suddenly politically correct. We are incensed that a trained social worker (especially the highest office holder in Australia), judged a 14 year old to be a willing participant in her own sexual abuse. We are indignant that someone with final veto over positions of power, unquestioningly assumed a paedophile would offend only once. And we cannot believe he based his decisions on a criminal's assurances he was no longer committing crimes.

For once the politically correct response is also morally correct. But after we've closed our newspapers and finished our dinner party discussions, how willing are we to put our money where our mouth is?

It's easy to support a cause from a distance; far harder to support those embodying that cause. And they - we - are everywhere. We are every third woman and seventh man in church each Sunday¹. We often come from good Christian families. We carry trauma, the way others carry memories of childhood beachside Christmas parties. We can't simply leave our dirty linen "in the past". For us, feeling dirty never fully comes out in the wash.

Have you ever listened to, and learnt from, someone who was abused? How much space do our churches give abuse survivors? When was the last time we corporately lamented the losses of those with no voice? Have you ever heard a sermon on the struggle to forgive after sexual abuse?

I used to think I didn't know anyone who had been sexually abused. I simply wasn't listening. Now I don't know many who *haven't* somehow been personally touched by abuse.

The Governor-General was right to resign for heeding the smug denials of abusers, rather than the silent cries of victims. But let's not settle for that alone - let's actually give the silent (ourselves or others) a voice, so that it never happens again.

1. Bass, Ellen and Davis, Laura. (1988). *The Courage to Heal*. New York: Harper and Row.

Monique Lisbon is a minister-in-training with the Churches of Christ, with an itinerant ministry in area of hope after abuse and suffering. She attends South Yarra Baptist Church and has just completed her sixth CD of songs grappling with the "mes" of life, If The Truth Hurts. Her website can be found at www.monomusic.com.au

