

3 Stages of Prayer We Must Learn

Contemplative prayer often has been relegated to ancient church history. But God is restoring it as a means to develop intimacy with Him.

I have found that the most direct road to greater intimacy with God has come through the practice or discipline of an almost lost art in the fast-paced church of today—something called contemplative prayer. More than a decade ago, this type of prayer came to my attention through some experiences God ordained, and since that time it has become one of the central features of my walk with God.

When I first began to practice it, I spent one full year reading only the Bible and the writings of the earliest Christian leaders, commonly known as the “desert fathers.” The more I read, the more I realized I was on familiar ground. This was a road I was already walking on to some extent.

Contemplative prayer is all about the quest for intimacy with God. The Bible is full of references to this quest:

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10).

“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Contemplative prayer is an ancient Christian practice that has not been widely known or practiced in many evangelical and charismatic ranks, but I believe the Spirit of God is restoring it to the broader body of Christ in our day.

In contemplative prayer, we as Christians do not relate to God primarily as the one who sits on His throne in heaven; we connect with Him instead, through the reality of our new birth in Christ, as the one who has taken up residence inside us. We each have a throne in our hearts where He dwells in a very personal way.

Richard J. Foster, a Quaker and author of the modern-day Christian classics *Celebration of Discipline* and *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, is a longtime student of various forms of prayer. Through his studies and experience, he has encapsulated contemplative prayer into three stages: recollection, the prayer of quiet and spiritual ecstasy.

Recollection. Phase one is recollection, which means letting go of all competing distractions. That is the idea behind Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Some translations literally say it this way: "Relax and let go, and know that I am God."

There is a correlation here between the inner knowing, in a revelatory way, of God's great love for us, and repentance on our part. "Repentance" means to turn away from sin and turn to God. In recollection, it means turning away from all competing distractions in order to focus on the Lord and His presence.

While resting in quietness, we ask the Holy Spirit to make Jesus real to us and close off everything else. Foster teaches that one way to do this is to see Jesus sitting in a chair across from us. He truly is present, but sometimes we need help to visualize that reality. God created our imagination and, like every other faculty we possess, we need to sanctify it, surrender it and use it for God's purposes.

Our ability to flow in the gift of working of miracles, including creative miracles, comes in part from our surrendering to the Lord our imagination, because that is where we begin to believe the impossible. Utilizing our imagination in contemplation is perfectly appropriate and one of the best uses to which we can put it when we ask God to sanctify and fill our senses with His Spirit. This is not the same as New Age imaging, but simply what Brother Lawrence called "the practice of the presence of God."

If frustrations and distractions press in on us, then we need a strategy for shutting them out. Madame Jeanne Guyon, the French Christian mystic of the late 17th and early 18th centuries and a pioneer of contemplative prayer, recommended meditating on Scripture for this purpose. She wrote that when competing distractions vie for our attention, we should muse, meditate, ponder and mutter upon Scripture. Meditating on Scripture helps us refocus our attention on the Lord.

The prayer of quiet. As we grow accustomed to the unifying grace of recollection, we are ushered into the second phase of contemplative prayer—what St. Teresa of Avila and many others called "the center of quiet," or the prayer of quiet.

Through recollection we have put away all obstacles of the heart, all distractions of the mind and all vacillations of the will. Divine graces of love and adoration wash over us like ocean waves, and at the center of our being we are hushed. There is a stillness, to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. Something deep inside of us has been awakened and brought to attention, and our spirit now is on tiptoe, alert and listening. Then comes an inward steady gaze of the heart, sometimes called "beholding the Lord."

Now we bask in the warmth of His dear embrace. As we wait before God, He graciously gives us a teachable spirit. Our goal, of course, is to bring this contentment into everyday expressions of life, but this does not normally come quickly

to us.

However, as we experience more and more of the inward attentiveness to His divine whisper, we will begin to carry His presence throughout our day. Just as smoke is absorbed into our clothing and we carry its smell with us, so the aroma of God's presence begins to seep into our being, and we become carriers of His fragrance wherever we go.

Spiritual ecstasy. The third phase of contemplative prayer is spiritual ecstasy. Anyone who has ever been around prophetic, seer-type people knows that they tend to be quiet in nature. They calm themselves, many times even closing their eyes, and wait in an almost passive repose. In that place of quiet detachment from the reality around them, illumination—the spirit of revelation—is granted, and their being becomes filled with God's pictures, God's thoughts and God's heart.

This is the way it works with me. I apply the blood of Christ to my life and quiet my external being. Then I worship the Lord and bask in the beauty of His presence. Then He takes me into rooms permeated with the light of His love and fills my being with visions He desires me to see. At times, I am so captured by His love that He leads me up higher into a heavenly place where my spirit seems to soar.

Spiritual ecstasy, the final step in contemplative prayer, is not an activity we undertake but a work God does in us. Ecstasy is contemplative prayer taken to the *nth* degree. Even recognized authorities in the contemplative prayer life acknowledge that it is generally a fleeting experience rather than a staple diet.

Another way to describe the ecstatic state is to be "inebriated" with God's presence. To an outside observer, someone caught up into the realm of the Spirit and taken to a rapturous place may appear drunk. The essence of this experience is to be overwhelmed with God's presence, whether

or not we see any pictures or hear any words.

Ultimately, the goal of our passionate pursuit is not an experience at all, but Christ Himself. As we learn to be still and know that He is God and commune with Him in our inner being, we will realize that we were created for fellowship with Him—and our inward life will provide the power for us to go forth to do His works.

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