

## "A SIMPLE WAY TO PRAY"

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformer,  
tells his barber how to empower his prayer life

### Introduction by the noted Methodist biblical scholar, R.C Sproul

He writes "I like to think of Martin Luther has a personal friend. He has become my friend as a pen pal gets to know another person. It is by reading his works, his letters, his sermons, etc. that I have, as it were, 'eavesdropped' on the man. In his manifold writings, Luther reveals not only his thought, but also himself. One thing screams through his pages: he was a man who not only delighted in prayer, but he was one who clung desperately to this means of grace. A portion of Luther's prayer, composed on the eve of his final meeting at the Diet of Worms, is contained in this book. In this prayer, we observe Luther naked before God, enduring his private Gethsemane. His prayer reveals the man.

"Yet, of all the writings of Luther, none has touched me more deeply than his 'A Simple Way to Pray.' It has been an "open sesame" for me. Of course, Luther was a Lutheran. But in this little book, he becomes for a season a true "Methodist." He gives a practical method for effective prayer.

"When we get upon our knees, we are all simple men. As simple people, we need a simple way to pray."

### Martin Luther, Man of Prayer - A brief summary by Archie Parrish

In his classic work on prayer, Fredrick Hieler declares of Martin Luther, "After Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul, the German reformer is indeed the most powerful among the eminent men who had a genius for prayer." The historical records show that Luther prayed 4 hours each day. Helmut Thielicke says "Luther prayed this much, not despite his busy life, but because only so could he accomplish his gigantic labors." Parrish states that a study of Luther "will provide insights that enable us to transform our prayer into a bold, powerful, proactive engagement with the forces of evil. The biblical prayer will result in new significant power for you, your family, your church, and the people in your circle of influence."

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of Rome buried biblical prayer beneath layers of institutional, mystical theology. For Rome, the church was the clergy. The grace of God

was dispensed only through the priests ordained in the succession of Peter. This concept turned prayer into an institutionalized ritual that made the priests' prayers more valuable than the prayers of laymen. Rome taught that God could not be approached by average sinners coming directly to Him. Rather, the people must approach God through priests and the saints. For most priests in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, prayer was a mechanical, religious rite, requiring little thought. The "faithful" confessed their sins, and the priest told them what penance they must render, how many "Our Fathers" or "Hail Marys" to say. Thus prayer became a legalistic work that supposedly had merit in itself.

In contrast to Rome, Luther and the Reformers after him emphasized the priesthood of *all* believers. They returned to the biblical model of prayer, which empowered the proclamation of the gospel that purified the Church and transformed the world.

Luther was schooled to become a lawyer, then after earning his master's degree in 1505, he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, Germany. He became a member of the order of Eremites, one of the 4 mendicant orders (Depending on alms for a living; practicing begging). He became a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Luther was described as being "blessed with extraordinary gifts, astonishing diligence and perseverance, superior eloquence, a greatness of soul, and consummate learning for the age in which he lived." He preferred the Holy Scriptures and sound reason over any human authorities or opinions, and this brought him into direct conflict with the power structure of the Roman church, which was led by Pope Leo X. In 1517, Luther's quest for truth moved to a new level when he nailed his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg. He merely desired to debate issues, but his act grew into a holy war between Luther and the pope, eventually leading in 1521 to his excommunication from the church and being declared public enemy number one, wanted throughout Europe dead or alive. All his followers were ordered to be seized wherever they were found, stripped of all their goods, and imprisoned.

It was during his "trial" at Worms, Germany in April, 1521 that Luther, in the midst of crisis that could have resulted in his being burned at the stake, was directed by God in answer to his prayer to Psalm 46 which was written at a time when the Psalmist saw the world falling apart. Psalm 46 reads:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth may change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered; He raised His voice, the earth melted. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah*

*Come, behold the works of the Lord, who has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire, "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth." The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah*

After meditating on this psalm, Luther wrote:

A Mighty Fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing;  
Our Helper He amid the flood  
O'er mortal ills prevailing.

For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work us woe -  
His craft and power are great,  
And armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing,  
Was not the right man on our side,  
The man of God's own choosing.

Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is He -  
Lord Tsabaoth His Name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

And though this world with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God has willed  
His truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him,  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure,  
One little word will fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,  
No thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gift are ours  
Through Him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go,  
This mortal life also -  
The body they may kill,  
God's truth abideth still:  
His kingdom is forever.

Historical records of the Reformation focus on correcting doctrine and purifying the church, but these aspects of the Reformation were driven by the reformation of prayer. Luther wrote in the preface to his "Larger Catechism", "we know that our defense lies in prayer alone. We are too weak to resist the devil and his vassals. Let us hold fast to the weapons of the Christian; they enable us to combat the devil...Our enemies may mock us. But we shall oppose both men and devil if we maintain ourselves in prayer and if we persist in it."

The clarion call of the Reformation was "the just shall live by faith." Faith is, in Luther's judgment, "prayer and nothing but prayer." "He who does not pray or call upon God in his hour of need, assuredly does not think of Him as God, nor does he give Him the honor that is His due."

## Selected Comments by Luther on Prayer

"As a shoemaker makes a shoe, and a tailor makes a coat, so ought a Christian to pray. Prayer is the daily business of a Christian."

"Prayer is the day's first worship service to God."

Luther uses these words at various times to describe prayer: living, powerful, strong, mighty, earnest, serious, troubled, passionate, vehement, fervent, and ardent.

**What motivated Luther to pray?** "Trouble touches the heart and wakens ardent longing for God's help. No one prays for anything deeply who has not been deeply alarmed."  
(There are no atheists in foxholes)

**In prayer, what is the role of confidence and expectation?** "The first stone in prayer is confidence. He who would pray must first believe."

"If I did not know that our prayer would be heard, the devil may pray in my stead. The Lord is great and high, and therefore He wants great things to be sought from Him and is willing to bestow them so that His almighty power might be shown forth.

Luther prays, "Dear Lord,...in You I shall never want. Be my treasury, my cellar, my storehouse; in you I have all riches; if I have You, I have enough."

**Luther's response to Jesus' urging to persevere and to be persistent:**

"We should never lose heart; but should persist in praying, wishing, and seeking until hope and the awaited liberation appear."

"There is no Christian who does not have time to pray without ceasing. By that, I mean spiritual praying. No one is so heavily burdened with his labor, that if he will, he can, while working, speak with God in his heart, lay before him his need and that of other men, ask for help, make petition, and in all this exercise, strengthen his faith."

"One should not only pray for an hour, but one must cry out and knock; you must forthwith compel God to come. As God continues to hide Himself, so begin to knock, and cease not until you have burst open the door that encloses Him. Audacious prayer, which perseveres unflinchingly and ceases not through fear, is well pleasing unto God."

### **Was prayer difficult or easy for Luther?**

It was "the hardest work of all - a labor above all labors, since he who prays must wage almighty warfare against the doubt and murmuring excited by the faintheartedness and unworthiness we feel within us."

"This is that unutterable and powerful groaning with which the godly rouse themselves against despair, the struggle in which they call mightily upon their faith."

### **For Luther, how important was a daily time of solitude?**

Luther built the rest of his daily schedule around his time with the Lord. He saw his time of solitude as significant not only for the present, but also for his entrance into eternity at death.

### **What was Luther's understanding of the value of united prayer?**

Jesus says that when two on earth are at one about something for which they pray, it shall be done unto them. Commenting on this, Luther says, "How much more should they obtain that for which they pray when a whole city comes together unitedly to praise or to pray...we can and we ought, indeed, to pray in all places, and at all times; but prayer is nowhere so vigorous and so strong as when a great number pray in unison."

### **How long and frequent did Luther think prayer should be?**

Luther recommended that our prayers be numerous, but short in duration. Say "brief prayers" that are "pregnant with spirit, strongly fortified by faith."

"The fewer the words, the better the prayer. The more the words, the worse the prayer. Few words and much meaning is Christian. Many words and little meaning is pagan."

### **How should petition be expressed?**

"The petitioner should not only present his desire to God, but he should bolster it well with particulars."

"The petitioner should give motives for his reason; he should seek by every indication and argument to move God to fulfill his wish."

### **What tools did Luther use in his prayer?**

Luther prayerfully wrote his "Small Catechism", and then he prayed portions of that catechism daily, even the day he died. This practice enabled him to connect doctrine and devotion.

The Lord's Prayer and the book of Psalms (the Psalter) were tools Luther considered most important. "A Christian has prayed abundantly who has rightly prayed the Lord's Prayer."

"The Lord's Prayer, the model of prayer, is exclusively petition. The Lord's Prayer is not essentially the prayer of the individual, but a common prayer. It binds people together within one another, so that each prays for the other and with the other." "Other prayers should be suspected that do not have or comprise the content and meaning of this prayer."

On the relationship of the Lord's Prayer and the Psalter, Luther says, "(The Psalter) runs through the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer runs through it, so that is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony."

"Whoever begins to pray the Psalter earnestly and regularly will soon take leave of the other light and personal "little" devotional prayers and say: 'Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter. Anything else tastes too cold and too hard.'"

### Luther's Advice on "A Simple Way to Pray"

In 1535, one of Luther's oldest and best friends, his barber, Peter Beskendorf, asked Luther for a simple way to pray that an ordinary man could use. In response, Luther wrote a 34-page book in which he outlined a method for personal devotions.

He begins, "First,...I take my little Psalter and hurry to my room or to the church, and say quietly and word-for-word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the (Apostles') Creed, and, if time permits, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some Psalms, just as a child might do."

He then recommends that "prayer be the first business of the day and the last at night" and warns against giving into ideas of postponing your personal devotions for some other business as "such thoughts get you away from prayers...and nothing comes of prayer for that day."

Luther reminds his friend that "Christ commands continual prayer: '*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will you give him a stone? If he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?*' He adds, "And Paul urges, '*Pray without ceasing.*'"

He cautions that "we must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind, and to not "become lax and lazy, cool and listless toward prayer", because "the devil who besets us is not lazy or careless, and our flesh is too ready and eager to sin and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer."

He then directs "when your heart has been warmed by such recitation to yourself (of the Ten Commandments, the words of Christ etc.) and is intent upon the matter, kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven, and speak or think as briefly as you can."

## The Lord's Prayer

Luther first takes each petition of the Lord's Prayer (there are seven) and elaborates on each one with a brief meditation or prayer keyed to the text of the catechism and the current situation of the time.

1. *Hallowed be your name*

Meditation - **For the Destruction of False Teaching**

Prayer - **For Conversion and Restraint**

2. *Your Kingdom come*

Meditation and Prayer - **For Protection and Extension of God's Kingdom**

3. *Your will be done on earth as in heaven*

Meditation - **For Help to Do God's Will**

4. *Give us today our daily bread*

Prayer - **For Peace and Good Government**

Prayer - **For Protection of Home and Family**

5. *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*

Prayer - **For God's Mercy**

Prayer - **For Our Enemies**

6. *Lead us not into temptation*

Prayer - **For Triumph Over the Devil**

7. *And deliver us from the evil one*

Prayer - **For Help to Pass Safely through Dangers**

Luther then expounds upon The Amen. "Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in His mercy will surely hear you and say 'yes' to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition, which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, "Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth." That is what Amen means.

Luther then gives some further guidance. "It is of great importance that the heart be made ready and eager for prayer." Just as a good barber must be focused on what he is doing so he doesn't cut his customer's ear or nose or throat. "If anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of one's senses and members. How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer?"

He tells his friend not to recite all of Luther's words in his own prayer as that would be "nothing but idle chatter and prattle." Luther points out that the heart should be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts which should be comprehended in the Lord's Prayer and these thoughts may be expressed in many different ways, depending on one's mood and feeling at the time of prayer.

He points out that if "an abundance of good thoughts comes to us" when addressing one of the petitions, "we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thought, listen in silence, and do not obstruct them. The Holy Spirit Himself preaches here, and one word of His sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers."

### The Ten Commandments

After praying through the Lord's Prayer, Luther goes through a similar process with the Ten Commandments. He divided each commandment into four parts, fashioning a garland of four strands. He thought of each commandment as first, **instruction**, which is what it is really intended to be. Second, he turned it into a **thanksgiving**; third, a **confession**; and fourth, a **prayer**.

Luther told his friend that the Ten Commandments are "intended to help the heart come to itself and grow zealous in prayer. Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit...It is enough to consider one section or half a section, which kindles a fire in the heart."

Again he suggested "if in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart, honor Him by letting go of the written scheme; be still and listen to Him. Remember what He says and note it well and you will behold wondrous things in the law of God."

### The Apostles' Creed

Luther closes by taking the Apostles' Creed and its three main parts or articles

1. *Creation of the Father*
2. *Redemption of the Son*
3. *Sanctification of the Spirit*

and again makes it into a garland of four strands, consisting of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer.

Opening Prayer:

"Dear God, we ask that You open our eyes and our hearts to what You have to say to us through the example of Martin Luther and his amazing insight into prayer. Let us come to know that when we pray we are not just "saying our prayers," but that we are spending time with and listening to our loving Father. In Your name, we pray. Amen!

Closing Prayer (from Luther's "A Simple Way to Pray"):

"O heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward You or to pray. But because You have commanded us all to pray and have promised to hear us and through Your dear Son Jesus Christ have taught us both how and what to pray, I come to you in obedience to Your word, trusting in Your gracious promises.

I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all Your saints and Christians on earth as He has taught us:

(Recite the Lord's Prayer)