

Introduction to the ABC'S of Prayer

For as long as I can remember I have struggled with the spiritual discipline of prayer. It has always been fairly easy for me to be in the Word every day. I have been reading through the Bible yearly and taking notes on my reading for many years. I was introduced to Bible memory in Bible college and it has been a part of my morning routine for a long time. But prayer, I've been up and down with that like I was riding a rollercoaster at Six Flags.

I've had seasons where I thought I was making progress, but I've had weeks where I seemed content to read the Bible and offer up a prayer or two on my commute. But lately, my Father in heaven has been impressing on me the importance of prayer like never before. Quite ironically, I have been disciplined at reading the Bible, which stresses above all other disciplines, the importance of prayer – so, I've been reading every day in the Word how critical prayer is for my life, and yet, I have been somewhat content and complacent with a marginal prayer life.

I remember reading the words of E. M. Bounds, “As important as it is to talk to men about God, it is infinitely more important to talk to God about men.” Surely, Jesus set that example for His disciples. He was a man of prayer. After careful research one Gospel writer observed, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Is there any wonder Jesus had such power in His ministry? I think observers of my life up to now would have to say, “But Tim occasionally offered up some prayer to God, but he failed to withdraw from his busyness to make prayer his business, and he almost never went into lonely places and persevered in extended prayer.”

Paul challenged us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and certainly prayer should be like breathing to us so that we walk every minute of our day in communion with the Father. But I want to focus on the drawing away portion of prayer. In this journey that I am inviting you to join I will share some things God is teaching me about how to pray seriously, intelligently, earnestly and specifically in our prayer closet. I hope you will join me in going to God as the disciples did so many years ago with this plea, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

I realize that some of us are more organized than others. There are those among us who wing most of life and whose idea of the perfect way to travel through time is to fly by the seat of their pants. Others of us love schedules, to do lists, filing cabinets, calendars and anything that speaks of order and organization.

Yet, in all my days as a pastor I have never met a bride-to-be who didn't have her preparation in gear regarding her wedding. It may be the only notebook she owns, but she has every detail planned out in her organizer, replete with schedules, receipts, contact information, magazine cutouts, and dream ideas of the ideal wedding. What drives these women to have their act together is the seriousness of the subject and their sold-out passion to give this biggest day of their lives the very best effort they can muster. Should our prayer lives receive any less work?

Let me go at this from a different angle, again comparing the organized and the not so much. Certainly, there are those who have the opportunity to give a speech and they don't write

anything down, just as there are others who are so petrified to speak in front of others that they literally read it off the paper. But my guess is, even if the end result is that someone in disapproval, rips the written speech into shreds, most of us would think a president should write his words down if he plans to deliver a State of the Union address. Similarly, if the valedictorian stands up and introduces her speech with, "I didn't write anything down," we are all likely to attribute that to laziness and carelessness and not to her style or propensity to be free in expression, not to mention our mutual disdain of a school administration who would cavalierly and irresponsibly allow her to wing something so critical to the success of the graduation ceremony.

Let me offer three other illustrations. I will venture to say that every single one of us who has a car, has a manual in our glove box, and that all types of people have this manual, whether we are organized generally or not. The salesperson doesn't ask, "Do you like to plan and prepare and order things?" "Yes." "Okay. Here is a manual." "No, I am a fly by the seat of my pants person." "Okay. I won't give you a manual, then. Troubleshoot your car like you do all of life. Wing it." Similarly, for a very complicated job, the supervisor gives a manual to both the organized and unorganized. Also, when a product needs to be assembled, instructions are included and there is no discrimination between those who like structure and those who don't.

Should the children of God not exercise the same care and forethought and planning in regard to our regular times before God? I am not saying that we can never talk to God spontaneously or without pre-planning. It's a great blessing to be able to approach the throne of grace whenever we are in need of His mercy and direction. But, at the same time, for our daily morning times with the Creator God of the universe, it just makes sense to me to put some thought and organization ahead of time into that meeting.

One of the tools I will write more about later is the laminated play sheet that I see every coach use from the sidelines of professional football. The coach would not dare wing his play calls for such important games. When it's fourth and one, he doesn't want to turn to his assistant coach and ask, "Any ideas on how we might pull this one off?" No way. He has a resource sheet in front of him with five different plays that he made the team practice for this very occasion. He wants to be prepared for the game, and he knows the only way to prepare for a game is to prepare before the game.

So, why would those of us approaching God with the game of life and death in our hands not come before Him having really prepared for the meeting? A couple of verses guide my thinking in this regard. God gave a stinging rebuke to His people at the close of the Old Testament for bringing Him their leftovers in sacrifice, "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" (Malachi 1:8). Am I bringing my best or my leftovers into my prayer life?

David understood that God deserved the best in his worship and proclaimed in 2 Samuel 24:24, "I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." How much does my prayer life cost me? Paul wrote these words about his effort in all of life, and certainly his

resolve must also apply to prayer, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23). Am I working at prayer with all my heart, as if I were doing it for the Lord?

If you believe you are currently working as hard as possible and planning with all your might for the most important meeting of any and every day, your time alone with God, then these next pages are probably not for you. But, if you like me, think you could use a complete overhaul or maybe even a little nudge in the direction of greater effort in prayer, then stay with me in the journey. My prayer is that each of us pick up at least one thing that can lift the level of our prayer life.

I have felt for some time that God has been leading me to come to my time alone with Him better prepared. I put hours into my sermon preparation and come with a script in hand to deliver what I am hopeful is my best effort, while completely depending on His Spirit. I keep careful record of my receipts in envelope and notebook form in order to be ready for Tax Day. I have been convicted that I dare not come to my time alone with God with less preparation.

When we think of it, the nature of prayer itself calls for some work ahead of time. Who of us hasn’t told a hurting brother or sister that we would pray for them? But without writing down this prayer request, what are the chances that we will actually remember it?

Having a prayer list, then, seems crucial for specific, informed praying. I remember the conviction I felt when a young man came to intern at my church. At some point in his service that summer, he informed me that he was praying through the directory, mentioning every person before God by name. Hello! I was the pastor of the church and wasn’t doing that.

Of course, I could come to my time of prayer without that directory and I could lift up the names that God brought to my mind, but even with a country church of a couple hundred, there was no way I was lifting up everyone by name without a list in front of me. To be quite honest, I can’t even remember the name of all my extended family members to bring them before God if I rely only on my memory to do so.

There is something else, though, that requires some work ahead of time. Prayer is not just about asking God for things; it is also about praising Him. Biblical praise calls for us to acknowledge who God is and to worship Him for it.

Yet, how often do I jump right into asking God for what I want without praising Him for who He is. On those rare occasions where I do spend some time in prayer praising God, I find myself, without adequate homework ahead of time, saying the same things to God about Himself, “God is good. God is great. God, we thank you for the food we eat.” Indeed, He is good, and He is great, but He is far more than those two attributes.

In addition, while God is an adequate name for the deity we worship, there is a much greater store of riches to draw from in the well of biblical names for God. My praise of God cannot be fully developed if I go into prayer armed only with my limited memory of who He is and what His names are. It seems clear to me that I can pray at any time with no preparation and with

complete spontaneity, but there should also be seasons when I go into prayer with more of an arsenal for my spiritual warfare.

This mindset has led me to develop a notebook, or perhaps, a better word for it is a Prayer War Manual. My goal at the end of this journey is to have my manual in order and to help others develop their own.

I have also been taking a closer look at the structure I was taught for prayer and I believe it is inadequate, or should I say, it's incomplete. For as long as I can remember, the structure for my prayer time with God has been the ACTS formula: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

I don't remember when I first heard it, but the moment I learned it, I decided to make it my model for prayer. The pattern itself is not completely followed in the prayers of the Bible, although these four elements can certainly be found in numerous prayers.

Of all four points, the one most consistently followed in the Bible is prayers that begin with praise. Jesus Himself taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9–10).

While the rest of the Lord's Prayer does not follow the ACTS structure, it is clear that Jesus models for us to begin with praise. Later in the prayer, confession of sins and specific supplication are addressed though not woodenly in the ACTS order of prayer. Traditional thanksgiving is not an overt part of the prayer Jesus taught.

Similarly, Nehemiah began his prayer with praise, "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands," (Nehemiah 1:5). The prophet continues by asking God to hear his prayer (verse 6), by confessing his sins and that of his people (verses 6b-7) and finally with asking God to grant his request (verse 11). Just as in the Lord's prayer, there doesn't appear to be thanksgiving in his prayer.

Solomon also launches his prayer with praise, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today" (1 Kings 8:23–24).

Immediately after his introduction of praise, Solomon presents his request for God to remember His promise to his father David (verses 25-26). Then, he praises some more, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (verse 27). After which, he makes some more requests (verses 28-30) and anticipates confession that will be necessitated by the sins of the people (verses 31f).

This cursory review of some of the prayers used to defend the ACTS model biblically reveals that while elements of the prayer formula can certainly be found in biblical prayers, the prayers do not follow slavishly this pattern, and some prayers do not have all the elements. This study began to make me think the pattern was not necessarily “the biblical mandate” for praying. In addition, recently, I have been finding that my prayer life needs more than these four elements. For instance, for most of my life, I have been taught about the armor of God and even challenged that I should put it on daily. Yet, I have lived nearly every day of my life without actually consciously putting on the armor. It struck me that there was no better time to put on the armor than in prayer, and that my prayer life should include this element in it.

Along that same line, as I began to study the attributes of God so that I could better praise Him, it dawned on me that many of these attributes constitute the “clothing of Christ Jesus” that I, as I follower of Christ, should put on. What better time to dress up or armor up is there than in prayer?

I also thought of other things I was prayerfully trying to do like remind myself of who I am in Christ, seek the Lord for who He is more than what I want from Him, be silent before Him, incorporate spiritual disciplines into my life, and plot my day and week according to the priorities God had been impressing me to live out.

As I thought through these elements, it was clear the ACTS model needed to be expanded and perhaps modified in its order. Therefore, I am expanding this four-part method into twelve parts with the acronym, the ABC’S of prayer.

Ironic, I suppose, but even after I lay out what I believe God is leading me to do in prayer, I have to exclaim that I am still in pre-school as a prayer warrior. I’m praying the Prayer War Manual guides me through more powerful and effective praying while My Father shapes me into a more mature prayer warrior in the journey.

Here’s how the acronym breaks down. While there are four main categories, roughly resembling the ACTS layout, the four categories contain additional elements that add up to twelve. A has one element; B has two elements; C has three elements; and S has six elements.

Under A, is the sole element - **Ascribe**. I have chosen to replace the word Adoration for Ascribe for two reasons. The first is to replace the noun of each ACTS element with an action verb. I want to write into the elemental labels of the prayer itself the work to be done.

Second, while we certainly should adore the Lord, ascribe is closer to the definition of what is being done at the start of the prayer, and as I will show later, it’s more closely aligned to the biblical verbiage and manner of expressing this sort of praise.

As such, the Ascribe tab of my notebook will feature an extensive study of the attributes of God with a 31-day plan to praise God for each of them. Each attribute study also shows the corresponding name of God attached to that character quality so that we can praise both His

attributes and His names. I will also include samples of praise from throughout the Bible so that we can learn to praise from the very prayers contained in God's Word.

Under B are two elements. The first element is **Believe**. Here in the notebook, I list verses of who the Bible says that we are. Satan is a liar and is constantly trying to tell us we don't measure up. As the new praise song goes, "I am who You say I am," and in this element of prayer, we thank God for who He originally created us to be, and who He additionally is graciously transforming us to be in Christ. I also have a resource on who we were. I find that the better I know who I used to be, the more I can appreciate whom God is shaping me to be.

The second element is **Bless**. I will show later that the Greek word for "bless" can also mean "thank," and that is what we do in prayer, beginning with thanking Him for the position we hold in Christ, which we have just affirmed to believe, and then, moving on to thank Him for our daily blessings. During this time, we "bless" the name of the Lord or declare, "blessed be the name of the Lord." I also spend time during this element focusing on the power of His name and our unique opportunity and privilege to honor His name above all others.

Under C, are three elements. First, we **Confess** our sins. You will notice that I have put praise and thanksgiving first and then followed it up with confession. While ascribing to God His worth in attribute and name certainly can lead naturally into confession, I think placing the elements of believing who we are in Christ and blessing the Lord's name for what He has done for us will transition us into confession even more powerfully. I will explain why I believe that is so when I begin to describe more fully the C components of prayer. This section includes a helpful list of the commands of the Bible. How can we confess what commandments we have broken if we don't know all of the commands? It also features a resource that explains how God defines sin and the colorful words the Bible uses for sin so that we don't downplay or minimize how offensive our sin is to God.

Then, I have added two other Cs – **Combat** and **Clothing**. In prayer, with assistance from my notebook study, during the combat phase, I put on the armor of God. I have put together a review sheet for each piece of the armor and the goal is to remind myself daily of the necessity of each piece and to consciously put it on during prayer every morning.

Beneath the armor, a soldier had other clothing. For Christians, our clothing is Jesus and the character of His being. So, before I put on the armor for the day, I intentionally decide to put on one of the 31 characters of God assigned by number to that date, and corresponding to the 31 attributes that I have already praised during the Ascribe portion of my prayer time.

Under S are six elements. It will be tempting after spending so much time in prayer in the ABC portion of my time with God to rush into the requests I am dying for God to grant. But in respect of who I am addressing and in recognition of my own inadequacy to know and express my needs, I pause to **Sob**.

I'm struck by the time people in the Bible took to grieve. I'll survey some of that later in the Sob tab of the Prayer War Manual. But I fear that with the fast pace of life, we don't grieve as we should.

The starting place for our grieving is to allow our hearts to break for what breaks God's. God weeps. We should weep for the reasons He does. In this portion of prayer, we align our hearts with the weeping God and allow His concerns to bear upon our souls. So, I have a resource for what the Bible says breaks the heart of God. We can use that to pray through those verses and allow ourselves to weep with God.

I also explore some of the songs of Lament in the Psalms and give some time in prayer to cry out to God for His heartbreak and for my own.

This will lead naturally toward **Seeking** Him, the next tab.

I want to declare before God that my first act of supplication is Him. I need things. I want other things. But more than anything, what I truly desire, what I truly need, and what someday I hope to mature enough to truly long for is Jesus.

Of course, the best way to seek the Lord is in His Word. The Westminster Catechism says it well, "The Scriptures principally teach what man is believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man." The best way to find Jesus is on the pages of the Book that reveals Him. Indeed, He is the Word of God.

Along with seeking Him, I choose to be **Silent** before Him. I remember reading a book where pastors in Korea were explaining that they prayed for longer time periods than pastors in America because they devoted time to listening.

I have a tab for this in my notebook, and I list verses that encourage the discipline to be still, but this time is literally off the page. I sit. I wait. I listen. I say with Samuel, upon the advice of Eli, "Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening."

It's a time to "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Or, as it is written in Psalm 131:2 (NIV84) But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

After sobbing, seeking and "Speak Lord," I **Surrender**. This portion of prayer is roughly the same as the "supplication" element of the ACTS model. We typically think of it as the time when we get to ask God for things.

Certainly, there is no shame in bringing our requests before God. He tells us that we have not because we ask not. He instructs us to come boldly to the throne of grace to find help in time of need. We are told to be anxious for nothing, but in prayer and supplication let your requests be known unto God. Jesus included requests in His model prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil."

I have a number of tools in this portion of the notebook. A daily log for present and ongoing prayer requests given to me by others, prayer letters from missionaries, the directory of our church, a list of family members and their dates of birth.

Beyond that, I have tools like the prayers Paul prayed and suggestions for parents to pray for their children as well as requests for spouses to pray for one another.

It's a time to petition God. But I have called this tab "surrender," because while we do need to come to God with our needs and desires, Jesus modeled for us to pray, "Not My will, but Thine by done."

I'm asking... without shame, but I'm also surrendering... without fear. God's ways are always best. My job is to ask and then to trust Him for the answer that is best.

The next tab is **Spirit-led**. I'm about ready to plan and plot my day. There are many things pressing for my attention. I feel the tyranny of the urgent coming upon me. But I am going to choose in the name of the Lord to pause and ask for the Spirit to direct my steps.

Far too many days have been spent by me leading, and all of them ended in disaster. Enough, Spirit, take the wheel. Where are You going today? Where would You lead me to go? What's the plan? It's another time to listen and wait for direction from heaven.

My final tab is **Serve**. Just as Jesus said that He did not come to be served, but to serve, I remind myself daily that I am on mission. I come to Jesus each morning to be filled with Him to overflowing and then I leave my time with His fullness to ooze out the presence and aroma of Christ on all I encounter.

The goal here is to be so full of Jesus with my needs so satisfied in Him and by Him that I need absolutely nothing from anyone else. Imagine being so completely fulfilled in Christ that you can live without needs requiring humans to meet. That is how Jesus lived, and by His power we can and should live that way also.

Start here.....

During this time in my prayer, I have a place in the notebook to contemplate the spiritual disciplines. I'm writing into my time of prayer a time of decision where I schedule spiritual disciplines like fasting into my week.

For far too long, I have had the spiritual disciplines on the backburner of my mind and life. On occasion, someone speaks of one or all of them, and I am convicted of my spiritual laxness. Or, a new book comes out highlighting the disciplines and I get motivated once more to put more work into my walk.

But the spiritual disciplines were never meant to be occasional convictions. An undisciplined walk with God is a dangerous path, and it demonstrates a lack of seriousness and earnestness in

spiritual matters. Every morning, I consider the disciplines and plot times during the week to practice them.

This final element of serve, then, is not just a mindset alignment, it is also a practical planning session. I want to plan disciplines into my week, but beyond that, I want my whole schedule bathed and planned in prayer. I also want to plot my week according to the priorities God has led me to develop for my life. I have identified 12 such priorities, which spell DISCIPLESHIP, and my goal is to spend time doing each of them at least weekly. Hence, I leave my time of prayer with a plan to live out the mission of God for my life.

I practically leave my quiet time with God and my play sheet. On one side are the key plays and reminders that I have for the game of life or perhaps better, the war of life. On the other side is my schedule and to do list for the week. I have a weekly plan and daily plan and both flow out of my time alone with God.

I have always loved the old hymn, “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” but I have seldom experienced it. An hour in prayer has always seemed too difficult to attain. Yet, when I read about the saints of old, those who seemed to especially excel in their private devotions and service to God, they all invested at least that much time in prayer.

With this system, I am actually starting to wonder just the opposite, “How in the world can I get all of this done in just one hour?”

I am trying to invest just 5 minutes in each of these elements. I have 12 components. Do the math. Before long, the sweet hour of prayer should become a part of my habitual routine.

So, welcome to the ABC’S of prayer, as aided the Prayer War Notebook. As Andrew Murray wrote years ago, and named his book by this title, let’s take a seat “With Christ in the School of Prayer,” and may we all come out on the other end better at prayer than when we first began... for the glory and praise of God.