



A PRAYING PASTOR

When only God is looking

John Benton

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Introduction

The apostles prioritized prayer.

They summarized their ministry by saying, 'We...will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word,' Acts 6.4. Note the word 'prayer' comes first.

The congregation in Jerusalem was blossoming. A problem had arisen in making sure that everyone was cared for as they should be. There was pressure on time for the leaders. But rather than compromise their priorities, with the involvement and approval of the church, they turned the matter of the distribution of alms among the widows over to others, in order to stay focused. Prayer was the foundation of everything. It came first in their thoughts, even before preaching.

Reversed priority

But there is a tendency to reverse that priority. It was there even in Spurgeon's time. He says: 'In the service of today, I believe the sermon to be a very important part; but I do not believe, as some do, that it is the all-important matter. I have heard friends say, "so-and-so will take the preliminary service," as if praying and singing were only a little preliminary affair to be got through, but the preaching was the great concern. But my brethren, praying is the end of preaching; the preaching is only the stalk, but the real ear (or fruit) is the devotion which we pray to God.' He is talking about public prayer here – but of course that must be based in private prayer. We can't be one thing on the public stage and strangers to God in our 'closets'.

We should be teaching our congregation to be people of personal prayer and worship. It is a mark of true conversion, Acts 9.11. So how can it be right for preachers to neglect prayer?

Unplugged preachers

A preacher can be likened to an electric guitar. He needs power. Unplugged he may be able to conjure a great melody or an inspiring break. But it is not going to blow anyone away. It will hardly be heard. It will not 'convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment,' John 16.8. Preaching has to be, 'not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction,' 1 Thessalonians 1.5. The gospel is to be preached 'by the Holy Spirit

sent from heaven,' 1 Peter 1.12.

In the study, we might make a correct and interesting exposition, write the tune and the riffs of the sermon, but the power is found in prayer. 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' Luke 11.13. Many are asking to be taught to preach, but not many are asking, with Jesus' disciples, 'Lord, teach us to pray,' Luke 11.1.

The apostles were not that foolish. They learned to pray. And, pastor, so must you.

1: Pastors and angels

As sinners we have a natural diffidence about prayer. 'Why would the holy God listen to me?' we think. But that is to forget the gospel.

There is more than we dare hope to being a Christian. I think borrowing a thought from the *Christianity Explored* course, Tim Keller writes, 'The gospel is this: we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.'¹ Through Christ, God has become 'our Father in heaven', who delights in our prayers as sweet smelling incense, Revelation 5.8. We can dare to believe that, in Jesus, our prayers are as fragrant as Chanel No 5 in God's council chamber, Romans 5.20. That should spur all Christians to pray.

Man of God

But there is more than we dared hope about being a pastor too. There is a heavenly dimension and dignity which has been set on us by God in calling us to the ministry, which should encourage us to be men of prayer. Let me try to unpack it.

In Scripture, the last days are the period between the first and second comings of Christ, Acts 2.17. Timothy was a NT Christian leader of the last days just as we are. Paul addresses him using a term which is loaded with meaning:

- 'But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness,' 1 Timothy 6.11.
- 'All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,' 2 Timothy 3.16, 17.

The phrase 'man of God' was often used of the OT prophets, Deuteronomy 33.1; 2 Kings 1.9,10 etc. So, to a degree, Paul sees us, pastors, as the NT equivalent of the OT prophets. The true prophets stood in the council of the Lord, Jeremiah 23.18; 1 Kings 22.19,20, to bring forth his word. And when we prayerfully open our Bibles in seeking God, we have a similar privilege. That's marvellous! But there is more.

¹ *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Tim and Kathy Keller, Dutton, 2011

Heavenly messengers

In Scripture, we sometimes find a kind of confusion between men of God and angels. For example, at Bokim, an angel does the work of a man of God, Judges 2.1-5, calling the people to repentance. Or again, we find that announcing the birth of Samson, his mother calls an angel a man of God, Judges 13.6f. And interestingly, that same overlap or confusion is also found in the NT concerning God's servants. Think about the early chapters of Revelation for example. In chapters 2 and 3, the letters from Christ are addressed to the 'angels' of the churches – the word can simply mean 'messengers' and is ambiguous. Then in chapters 4 and 5 we have 'elders' around the throne of God. We usually think of angels in heaven – but John has them in the churches. We usually think of elders in the churches – but John has them in heaven. John appears to be deliberately blurring the lines between heaven and earth. Not only does this mean that we should have a much higher view of the local church (the suburbs of heaven, Hebrews 12.22), but also a much higher view of what it is to be a pastor – a man of God. We are like angels.

Now, all this might seem too much for us – groomed in scepticism and dulled by secularism. We may never have grasped this heavenly dimension to our identity. But this is how the NT sees men called to ministry. This is both inspirational and aspirational. We are 'heavenly men' – so we should aspire to be holy men. But it also inspires us to pray. We have a place in the council chamber of heaven – especially as pastors. We should not be thinking, 'what's the point of me praying?' Our voice is wanted in heaven. We are encouraged to pray.

Fellow servants

Another angle on our heavenly identity is found at the end of Revelation. We read there of John, the apostle, meeting an angel and, overwhelmed by his glory, being tempted to worship him, Revelation 19.10.³ But the angel won't have it – not only because worship is due to God alone, but because the angel sees himself as nothing but a 'fellow-servant' with John. Angels do not have a superior status to us. They may have more wisdom, glory and power than us but they do not have a greater office. They are alongside us and we are alongside them as servants of the Lord. Of course, it is all by grace and none of our deserving that we enjoy such an astonishing privilege. But it should lead us to prayer and to be confident in prayer.

² See Genesis 18.2, 19.1,10; Acts 6.15; Galatians 1.8; 4.14

³ See also Revelation 22.9

English Puritan

Interestingly, in expounding Job 33.23-24, William Perkins, the 16th century father of English Puritanism, pointed out this same parallel between ministers and angels. Don't have too low a view of yourself, pastor. In *The Art of Prophesying*⁴ Perkins writes: 'This is the reason why respect and honour should be given by all genuine Christians to God's ministers (especially when they adorn their high calling with a holy life): they are angels of God.'

⁴ *The Art of Prophesying*, by William Perkins, Banner of Truth, 1996, page 85-88.

2: Setting up a routine for prayer

Foolish ideas of spirituality scoff at the thought of routine and habits of prayer. It is said to equate it with legalism – which it is not at all and is a total category error. (Having regular meals is not legalism, it is simply common sense.)

In fact, God has made human beings for routine. Built into the very way our world functions, is the daily, 24-hour routine of day and night. By his own example in creation as indicated in the fourth commandment, the Lord has given us the weekly routine of the day of rest, the Lord's Day. He has given us the yearly cycle of the seasons and promised, 'As long as the earth endures seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease,' Genesis 8.22. It is against the background of this regularity that we live out our lives. We are not meant to fight this pattern but to harmonize with it. We should be people of habit – good habits.

- The OT sacrifices were offered daily, morning and evening, by the priests, Exodus 29.38,39 and Christians are to continually offer sacrifices of praise, Hebrews 13.15.
- Even under threat of his life, Daniel would not budge from his routine of daily prayer. 'Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before,' Daniel 6.10.
- Jesus expected his disciples to pray daily, Luke 11.3. We find him praying in the early morning and at night, Mark 1.35, Luke 6.12. Praying nightly in Gethsemane was his custom while visiting Jerusalem, Luke 22.39.
- Paul spoke of praying 'night and day' – evidently a habit with him, 2 Timothy 1.3, Psalm 92.1-3.

Of course, we make allowances for emergencies, but, especially as pastors, we are to set up and try to stick with customary patterns of prayer on a daily basis.

Alone with God

We are to 'wait upon God' in prayer, Psalm 27.14; 40.1; Isaiah 40.31. Waiting on God is to acknowledge that God is God. He sets the agenda, not us.

In considering this, the first thing we must try to do is to find a space where we

can routinely be alone with God. We need a 'secret' place. We want to avoid spectators.

Jesus emphasizes that if at all possible, prayer is to be a solitary exercise. He tells those who would pray to 'go into your room and shut the door,' Matthew 6.6. Prayer should be unseen while it seeks our 'Father who is unseen.' Jesus often left his disciples or sent people away in order that he might pray, Matthew 14.23; Mark 1.35; Luke 4.42; 6.12; 22.41; John 6.15.

And we find that miraculous things can happen behind closed doors, 2 Kings 4.4f.

So, think about finding a quiet place in your house (or elsewhere), where you can be regularly alone and unlikely to be disturbed. Probably the early morning is best for this.

Organizing your prayers

As a pastor, one of your primary duties is to pray for your people. Paul's letters constantly begin with him reassuring the churches that he is praying for them, and praying for them as individuals, Philippians 1.4. The prophet Samuel promised to pray for his people even after, in a measure, they had rejected him, 1 Samuel 12.23.

So, you need a list of church members (and perhaps other regular attenders) to use for your prayers. If your church is of a reasonable size you won't be able to pray for everyone every day. Therefore, divide the membership (and the activities of the church) among the days of the month and give time in prayer to those people each day.

However, it is always good to leave extra time for prayer. For example, it may well be that when a pastoral crisis blows up within the congregation you need to pray for the individuals involved every day for a period, without neglecting others. Sometimes we find Paul agonizing in prayer over particular situations, Galatians 4.19, 20.

Prayer can be tiring. It can take a lot of spiritual and emotional energy. Satan opposes us. Epaphras had to wrestle in prayer for his church, Colossians 4.12, Romans 15.30, This is another reason why prayer in the morning is good.

Questions to consider

1. When are you going to schedule in your main daily time of prayer? You may need to talk this through with your wife in order for your prayer routine to harmonize with the family's routine. You may need to set the alarm on your phone. You will certainly need to embrace being disciplined about this and win the battle against the delicious duvet, which will invite you to stay in bed. You may need to go to bed earlier in order to get the rest you need. Remember, prayer requires energy.
2. How long are you going to aim to spend with God? Make a reasonable calculation. Don't set a pattern you will find impossible to keep up. Perhaps if you have small children you won't be able to manage more than half an hour in the mornings. You must not use prayer as an excuse to neglect family duties. As children grow up maybe that time can be extended. When they eventually leave home, you may be able to give more time to prayer and reading God's word for the good of your own soul. (Don't be a pastor who only reads Scripture to make a sermon!)
3. How about praying specially for Sunday ministry? It would be good to set an extra time for prayer on Saturday evening (perhaps with your wife) specifically focusing on the next day's ministry.

3: What should we be praying?

The danger is that a pastor's prayer for his church can turn into nothing but a kind of spiritual shopping list which we present each day to the Lord. This is better than not praying at all. But the NT calls us to much more than a trip to the 'spiritual supermarket'. Here are three suggestions to consider.

Let God be the centre

We have already noted the parallel the Bible makes between pastors and angels as servants of God. Worship is the default occupation of the angels. When they fly on God's errands, they come from the place of worship. They are worshippers before they are workers.

One thinks of Isaiah's experience as he was called to be a prophet. He saw the LORD, surrounded by seraphs, worshipping and joyfully declaring, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty...' Isaiah 6.3. It is one of these angelic worshippers who flies to Isaiah to take his guilt away with the live coal from the altar, Isaiah 6.6. Action should be rooted in adoration. Therefore, our prayers must begin with worship. God must be central.

The Lord Jesus taught the same lesson as he gave us the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. It begins, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name...' Matthew 6.9. The devil will try to divert us from worship. But, as we come in Jesus' name to God our Father, we should make sure that we treat God as our Master and ourselves as his servants, not *vice versa*. This surely requires us to begin our prayers with heartfelt worship, Mark 7.6.

We should worship God that he is God the mysterious Trinity. Worship him for his attributes of power and love and more. Worship him for his great works of creation, providence and salvation. Worship him for his relation to us in Christ as 'creator, Father, redeemer, king, almighty friend and our everlasting portion.'⁵

Let God set the agenda

As we ponder our congregation with a kindly eye, it is understandably possible to focus more on their worldly needs than on their spiritual needs. It is certainly not wrong to pray about the aches and pains of older church members, the

⁵ *A Guide to Prayer*, by Isaac Watts, Banner of Truth, 2001, page 11-13.

work-loads and redundancies faced by those in middle age and the imminent exams of our teenagers etc. But the pastoral prayers of the NT target more spiritual needs. Pastors are commended to their congregations as those who are 'keeping watch over your *souls*, as those who will give an account,' Hebrews 13.17 (ESV).

It is worth reading through these four classic examples of Pauline pastoral prayers to help you set your prayer agenda.

- Ephesians 1.16-20: Paul is praying for spiritual eyesight for Christians to see who they are in Christ; that they may grasp God's power for their good and the inheritance that awaits them. He is praying that they enjoy God's promises through faith in Christ.
- Philippians 1.9-11: Here Paul prays for increasing love which is well-informed and leads to obedience. The root of almost every problem in churches today is lack of Christian love; 1 Corinthians 13.
- Colossians 1.9-12: Paul prays that Christians will have a clear knowledge of God's will and the spiritual strength to keep going in living a life worthy of the name Christian.
- 2 Thessalonians 1.11-12. Here Paul is praying for these Christians to live well and for God to make their gospel projects to bear fruit for Christ's glory.

You ought to be prayerful especially for elders or church leaders that they should be at one with each other and be good examples. You ought to pray especially for young people, because the world with all its online diversions and temptations is desperate to have them. You ought to pray especially for young singles, because they need stability and love with no family around them. You ought to pray especially for families because so many mums and dads are under pressure at work and Christian families go wrong with children left unconverted. You ought to pray for your own wife and family because they are part of the church too and live with you and are only too aware of your failings. You ought to pray especially for old people because the world doesn't want them and sometimes even their families don't want them. You get the idea? You ought to pray especially for *everybody*; prioritize them all, Philippians 1.4,7,8.

Let God have the glory

We were taught by our parents to say both ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to people. It is the right thing to do. But we have so much to thank God for.

There is a right and clear emphasis in Scripture on giving God thanks for all his goodness and particularly for his answers to our prayers. The note of God-glorifying thanksgiving needs to be struck every time we pray.

- ‘Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise’, Psalm 100.4
- ‘Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good’, Psalm 136.1
- ‘Taking the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks’ Mark 6.41
- ‘I thank my God every time I remember you...’ Philippians 1.4
- ‘Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God,’ Philippians 4.6
- ‘...joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light,’ Colossians 1,12
- ‘We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers,’ 1 Thessalonians 1.2

With this in mind, it may be helpful to keep a prayer diary. Here you can record specific prayer requests and note when the Lord answers those prayers. This has a twofold benefit. *First*, it will prompt you to be thankful, not only for his general kindness but for particular issues on which the Lord has acted. *Second*, of course, keeping such a prayer diary will hopefully encourage you to pray as you review the Lord’s answers in the past.

God does not always move to our timescales – so make allowances for that. But if, reviewing your prayer diary, you find that over time the Lord is not answering your prayers that will prompt you to look into what the reasons might be and lead you to repentance and change, Psalm 66.18; Matthew 5.23; Mark 11.25; 1 Peter 3.7. Let prayer and God’s answers flow freely again.

Yes, God already knows what we need, but he requires our prayers and deserves our thanks for his glory, which is the purpose of all things, Romans 11.36.

4: Sermons and prayer

The apostles prioritized prayer. But they did so in conjunction with the preaching of the gospel.

At the beginning of the booklet, we saw how they told the church, 'We...will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word,' Acts 6.4. These two activities went hand in hand for the apostles and they must also for us.

Paul's prayer requests

We find that Paul makes request for Christians to pray for his preaching ministry. These requests give us insight into the kinds of things we need to be praying for ourselves as we go about our duties to expound God's word and speak for Christ.

To the Ephesians, he writes: 'Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should,' Ephesians 6.19, 40.

- He wants words given by the Holy Spirit in his preaching
- He wants to display the wonderful mystery of God's love
- He wants to be fearless in declaring what God's word says

To the Colossians, his request is similar: 'And pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may declare it clearly, as I should,' Colossians 4.3,4.

- He wants God-given opportunities to speak
- He wants to proclaim Christ
- He wants to preach clearly, not in a muddled or obscure way

To the Thessalonians, his request for his ministry is: 'Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith,' 2 Thessalonians 3.1,2.

- He wants the gospel to make progress and for many to hear
- He wants the gospel to be honoured by people coming to faith in Christ
- He wants opponents to the gospel to be removed

This gives a pastor a starting point for his prayers for his pulpit ministry and evangelism.

Spurgeon's advice

Let me quote the great preacher C. H. Spurgeon here.⁶ He speaks about prayer in the three areas of preparation of the sermon, delivery of the sermon and what a preacher should do after the sermon.

Prayer will assist you in preparation:

'Waiting upon God often turns darkness to light. Persevering enquiry at the sacred oracle uplifts the veil and gives grace to look into the deep things of God... How much Peter learned upon the rooftop. The closet is the best study.... The best and holiest of men have ever made prayer the most important part of their pulpit preparation.'

Prayer will assist in your delivery:

'Most preachers who depend upon God's Spirit will tell you that their best and freshest thoughts are not those that are premeditated, but ideas which come to them, flying on wings of angels; unexpected treasures brought on a sudden by celestial hands...' But he says we can't expect this if we don't pray about our delivery.

Prayer is appropriate after the sermon:

If we feel the sermon has gone well, it is appropriate to humbly give thanks to God. If it has not gone as well as we would have liked, then respond by prayer. Spurgeon says: 'How shall we be comforted but in moaning out our complaint to God. How often we have tossed to and fro upon our couch half the night because conscious of shortcomings in our testimony! How frequently have we longed to rush back to the pulpit (and try again!). Where could we find rest for our spirits but in prayer... If we cannot prevail with men for God, we will, at least, endeavour to prevail with God for men.'

'If you become lax in private devotion you (preacher) are much to be pitied; but also, your people are to be pitied.' On the other side he says: 'Great talents you may never have, but you will do well enough if you abound in intercession'.

⁶ *Lectures to My Students*, by C. H. Spurgeon, Banner of Truth, 2008, page 42ff

So actually, the place of prayer becomes a place of great hope for those of us who know our limitations; Luke 11:13.

Do you have a routine of prayer around your sermons?

Though God is in heaven, he will hear our cries from the depths, Psalm 130.1. And, through Christ, God makes great promises to us.

Because we have Jesus as our great high priest, 'let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need,' Hebrews 4.16.

We have a God 'who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,' Ephesians 3.20.

5: How to spend a day in prayer

If you do your best with what we have already discussed in this booklet about a pastor's life of prayer, then you are doing well. It is enough. You are a good pastor.

But there may be occasions which call you to give yourself to prayer in a more concentrated way for a season - perhaps day or half a day. However, many men feel that, although they would like to engage in such extended prayer, they simply feel overwhelmed by the prospect and are not sure how to handle it. This chapter attempts to give some practical advice.

Preparing for time with God

Spending such time in prayer and communion with God will pay spiritual dividends. Here are some things to consider.

1. What's the point?

Fellowship with God: An extended time with God just means plain being with God, consciously thinking about him and calling on him. It can be a way of drawing near, James 4.8.

Renewed perspective: It is like flying over the battlefield. When going through times of trouble, we need this perspective to sharpen our vision of what is going on. Ephesians 6.12.

Evaluating our lives before the Lord: This is especially useful when facing important decisions in life, Luke 6.12,13.

2. Scheduling the time and place

Make a date in your diary for this extended time of prayer. Clear it with your wife. It won't work if actually you are bunking off and leaving her at a time when she needs help with the children or she has something important already in her diary.

Find a good place. Your study might be fine – but there might be temptation to revert to normal sermon prep. Find a quiet place. Maybe there is a house in the fellowship where both people are out all day and they would be happy for you to come in and use it? Or in fine weather you may want to go into the country?

3. Make a worry list

Sometimes all that will happen if you have time on your own is that your mind will fill with your problems and your worries – and there is a danger of spending

the day focused on them instead of on God. So beforehand write down your worries. Give some thought to your current problems, no matter how small and list them. And then say to yourself, 'I will get to them – and pray through them for a limited time – but I'm not going to let them dominate the day.'

4. *Take some equipment*

Think through what you might need for the day, especially if you decide to go out into the countryside or beach to a quiet spot. You will need a Bible and a pencil and paper. You might want to take your current prayer list or prayer letters from Christian workers. You will need some lunch etc.

5. *How to stay alert*

Make sure that you get adequate rest for a night or two before. When you are engaged in your extended time with God change positions – sit for a while then walk around, and so on. Have variety in what you do. Read the Scriptures, pray, write, sing a hymn. Praying out loud, in a soft voice if necessary, will help you to concentrate and save you from your thoughts wandering all over the place. Verbalize your prayers.

6. *Taking notes*

Especially if you are spending time in seeking God over some particular matter, it is good to be able to write down the things you feel the Holy Spirit is impressing on your heart. If God reminds you of something you ought to do which you have totally forgotten it is good to make a note of it.

Towards the end of your time you might want to write down some conclusions. Keep these notes and review them later. This will both encourage you and give you direction.

7. *What has happened?*

Don't feel you must end the day with some new discovery or palpable life-changing experience. You may do, but if you don't, it's not been a failure. Remember that prayer is about waiting on God, Psalm 27.14, not him fulfilling your agenda. He may lead you to do something practical. He may simply enable you to see him in a new light and be led into deeper appreciation of him.

How to spend the time

Here are some suggestions which might be helpful. These are not hard and fast rules. You might want to start with these – but then as you get into your own pattern and develop your own ideas. *It is often good to divide the time into three parts.*

Wait on the Lord in thanksgiving and worship, Romans 1.21; 11.36. Realize his presence, reflect on his goodness, confess your sins and your need. Worship him for his heart of grace and the gift of his Son.

Pray for others. Ask specific things for them. As we have seen, it is good to use Paul's prayers in his epistles for people in the NT churches in order to know the kinds of things to ask.

Pray for yourself. Be totally honest with God yet not too introspective. You can briefly bring your worry list in here. But you will end the day worse than you started if all you do is think of yourself and your problems. Reflect on what Scripture says about the great privilege of being called into ministry / service – again be thankful and worshipful.

The Circle Method

This is another suggested, more structured, way of going about things. *Use an A4 sheet of paper.*

It can be good in preparation to select, or ask the Lord to impress upon you, a few verses or a passage of Scripture which will act as the way into prayer and your compass for the day. You can focus your thoughts around those verses and keep coming back to them if your mind wanders.

At the centre of the A4 sheet draw a fairly big circle and copy your verses into that circle.

Then around that centre circle draw three other circles. Each of these circles will represent an hour in prayer. So you choose three areas to pray over. They might be as we have already suggested

Worship / thanksgiving
Other people
Yourself

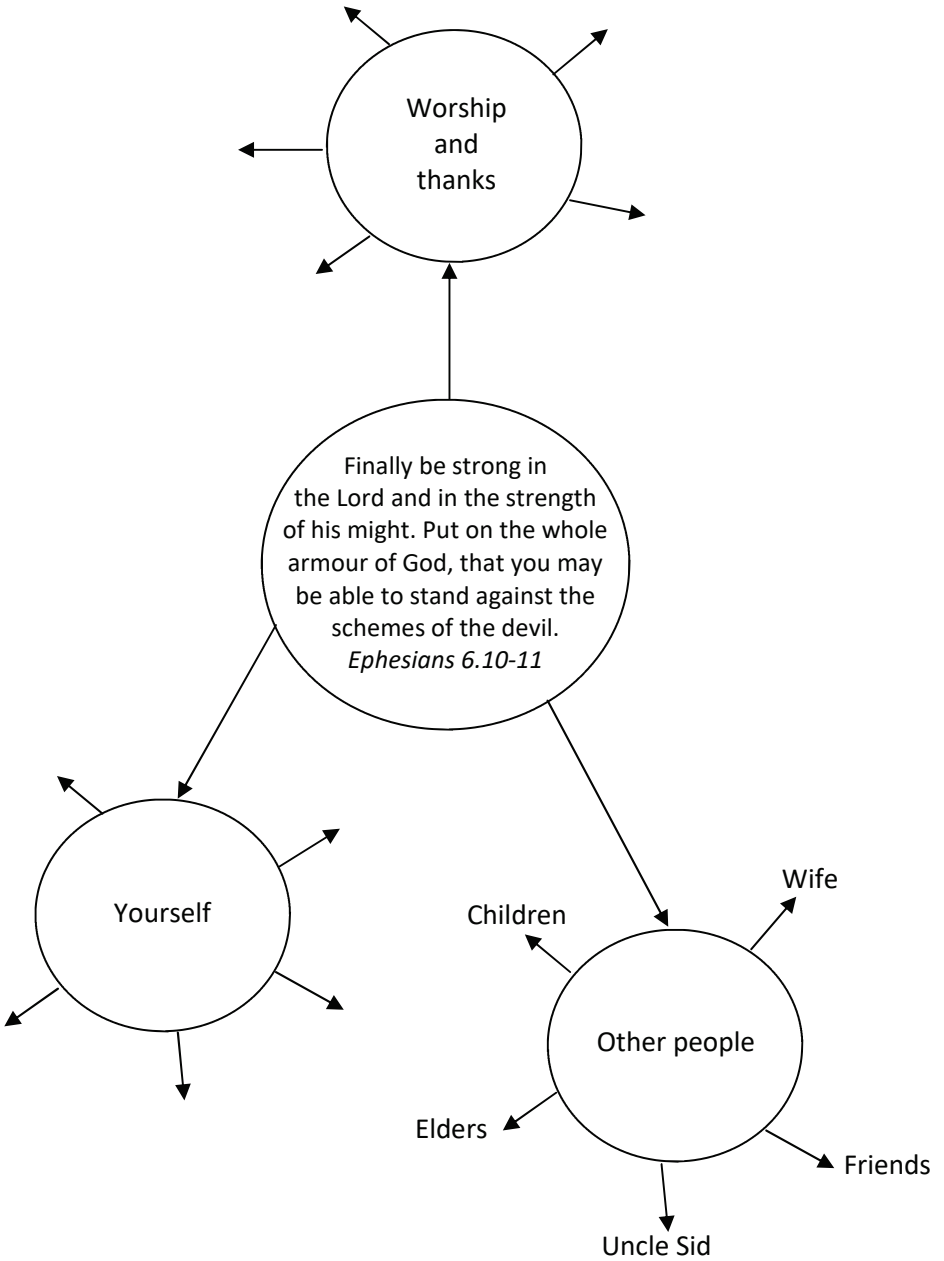
Or they could completely different things which you feel you need to pray through. Say

Family
Church leaders
Church

Label your circles. Then from each of the 3 surrounding circles draw 5 lines (or spikes). At the end of each line name a person or a situation related to the subject labelled in this circle. You are then going to spend 10 minutes praying for each of those 5 people / situations / needed blessings. 5 x 10 minutes doesn't quite make an hour! But that gives you leeway to stretch your legs or to pray about some other matter which the Lord might lay on your heart as you pray through the subject.

After each hour in prayer give yourself a break. After the first circle, you can have a half-hour coffee break. Or go and clean the house. Or do some physical exercise if that helps you to refresh you. After second circle it may be lunch time – take an hour, relax or read. Then it's time for the third circle. Again, follow this with a tea break or whatever is appropriate.

A fourth hour is good. Here you can leave the circles behind. There may be things on your spikes you feel you need to pray for again. You may want to pray through your worry list at this point. There may be other things that God has brought to your attention – perhaps a challenge in your own life which you need to pray over. It is always good to finish this time with a few moments in worship and thanking God for who he is – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.



6: Fasting?

This is the practice of going without food, or other pleasures, for a period in connection with earnestly seeking God. There may be times in your ministry where you feel that this is necessary.

We come across fasting fairly frequently in Scripture. It is usually a response when very important issues are at stake. These can be of a negative or a positive kind.

Its Occurrences

A national fast was called in Israel when there were public calamities or God's hand of judgement was on them, 2 Samuel 1.12; Joel 1.14. When God seemed absent and his people were scorned, the psalmist fasted, Psalm 69.10. Esther called a fast in the light of Haman's threatened holocaust, Esther 4.6.

It was used by Israel at times of national confession of sin and penitence, 1 Samuel 7.6; Nehemiah 9.1-3.

Daniel fasted for God to fulfil his promises and end the exile in Babylon, Daniel 9.2,3. Anna fasted as she waited and sought God for the coming of his redemption, Luke 2.36-38.

Most famously, the Lord Jesus fasted before commencing his public ministry, Matthew 4.2. The church at Antioch fasted as they worshipped and asked guidance from God which resulted in the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13.1-3.

Its Purpose

The aim of fasting is not to blackmail God as if we are on some hunger strike in order to force God's hand. Neither is fasting an end in itself, Matthew 9.14,15. It is not to make ourselves feel more 'holy' or give the impression of being 'spiritual' people. This is the way of false and legalistic religion, Jeremiah 14.11,12; Luke 18.12; Colossians 3.20-23.

Also, we cannot use fasting as a way of covering over the neglect of other duties, including just dealings with others. True fasting is first of all to fast from sin, Isaiah 58.1-7.

- Rather, fasting is a way of showing how serious we are with God in a particular situation. When fasting, we are saying to God something like, 'We need you Lord more than we need our food.' In this way fasting is a fitting accompaniment to prayer by way of intensifying our seeking of God.
- It is also an indication of how urgently we view a particular situation. It is saying that none of our earthly pleasures are worth anything without the Lord, 1 Corinthians 7.5.
- It is also a way of acknowledging our deep dependence on the Lord. We are frail and failing sinners, totally reliant upon his provision and grace. Therefore, fasting also may be included as part of worship, Luke 2.37.

A pastor may engage in such fasting when there has been some gross sin in the church and church discipline has had to be applied. He may fast simply because he feels the church has become complacent and is in urgent need of a measure of renewal and revival. It is to be engaged in humbly Psalm 35.13, secretly Matthew 6.16-18, and penitently.

Its Practicalities

If we contemplate the need for fasting occasionally as part of our pastoral ministry, we should not begin by setting the bar too high. Seeking to imitate the Lord Jesus by embarking on 40 days of fasting may be more to do with spiritual pride than Christian common sense, Matthew 4.1,2.

What you are doing needs to be discrete and also manageable. Perhaps the only person who might need to know about it is your wife as you miss a meal or two. I have sometimes thought that if we need to get on with other work, if we fast during our work, it is a way of continuing to hold our prayers before God even when we are not consciously praying.

Also, of course, before we embark upon a short period of fasting, we need to be mindful of any health issues we may have. The Lord does not want us to endanger our health. If we do have some condition which might be adversely affected by fasting then the Lord understands and wants us to work within the parameters that his providence has set on our lives.

Its consequences

As God's people humbly seek him in fasting, then the Lord does take notice and brings blessing.

Jesus said, 'But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father in heaven, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you,' Matthew 6.17, 18.

Conclusion

'It is not sufficient, to make a minister of the Gospel, to have a system of wholesome doctrines in the head, except he is led by the Holy Spirit to see and feel the glory of the person of Christ, and the excellency of the work accomplished by Him for sinners. The truths which he preaches must be his *own* food and nourishment, and not food to be talked of to others only. What need we have to be humble and fervent in prayer for divine illumination and teaching! If we ourselves live far from God in daily communion, we can do but little good to others with our refined notions.'

Thomas Charles of Bala.⁷

⁷ See *Daniel Rowland and the Great Awakening in Wales*, by Eifon Evans, Banner of Truth, 1985, page 332