

What is Prayer?

Isaac Penington

(1616 – 1679)

True prayer is the breathing of the child to the Father which begat it, from the true sense of its needs, for the supply of those needs.

"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." John 3:8. God, by the breath of his Spirit, begets a man out of the spirit and likeness of this world into his own image and likeness. He that is begotten in this way needs nourishment, needs the divine warmth, the breasts of consolation, the clothing of the Spirit, the garment of salvation. He needs the bread of life to feed on and the water of life to drink. He needs strength against the enemy's assaults and wisdom against his snares and temptations. He needs the arm of the Deliverer to preserve and carry on the work of redemption daily. He needs faith to deny the fleshly wisdom that he may trust and feel the virtue of the arm of the Deliverer. He needs hope, patience, meekness, a clear guidance, and an upright heart to follow after the Lord. Indeed, very many are the daily needs of that child which is begotten by the breath of God, in its state of weakness, until it is drawn up into the unity of the body, where the full communion with the life is felt, the heart satisfied, and the deficiencies drowned.

Now the breathing of this child to the Father from the true sense of these needs for his supply—that is prayer. Even if it be but a groan or sigh which cannot be uttered or expressed, yet this is prayer, true prayer, which has an acceptance with the Lord and receives a gracious answer from him. And he that begets the child is the one who teaches him to pray, even by the same Spirit which begat him. In watching daily to the Spirit, the child is kept sensible of the will of the Father, and in his light he sees the way wherein he is to walk. He sees also the enemy when he is coming, and the snares he is secretly laying, and he feels his own weakness to withstand or escape. And in the sense of this his heart cries to the Father of spirits for preservation, for him to step in in the needful time, even in the season of distress. And thus watching to the Spirit, the life of a Christian is a continual course of prayer; he prays continually. This is the living prayer of the living child, which consists not in a form of words, either read out of a book or conceived in the mind, but in feeling the breath of its nature issuing out from the seed of life within to the living spring, which is the Father of it. And the

Father, by causing his virtues to spring up in it, nourishes the soul to everlasting life.

But many are those who are not born of the Spirit, but (by conceiving some of the truths of God in the wisdom from below) have attained to some change of opinion and conduct. These pretend to be of this birth from above, though indeed they are born but "of blood," or "of the will of the flesh," or "of the will of man," John 1:13. And though they will be imitating the things which God begets in and gives to the true child, they are outside of the nature and spirit where the true child is begotten, and where the true gift of the Father is received by him. These will be believing, though they have not received a portion of the living faith from the hand of the Father. They will be forming repentance and sorrow for sin, though their heart is not turned from it. They will be hoping in God's mercy, although they are off the foundation and out from under the shadow of the mercy-seat. And they will be praying, though they have neither received the Spirit, nor been taught by the Spirit to pray. And so being out from that which should guide them and teach them the truth and way of worship as it is in Jesus, they run out into inventions and imaginations, setting up a way of their own choosing. And having given much thought to their way, and formed it by reasonings, and fenced it about with arguments, these grow wise in their own eyes, and now verily believe it to be the way of God, and that they can maintain it against all opposers.

So it is that one man is for a particular form of prayer or worship, and another man is against that form, and instead is for another; and each thinks himself able to maintain his own view, and to overthrow the other. But oh, that the ear were open which can hear the truth! If only there were a true, honest, upright desire after God, from the simplicity of the heart, then man would not be so easily betrayed by the subtlety of the fleshly wisdom, which lies lurking in the wise and reasoning part of man, to betray the poor, weak babe. The natural man, the reasoning man, the understanding man, the wise man according to the natural wisdom, cannot understand the things of God. In the wisdom and understanding of man there is no learning to pray aright, to believe aright, to hope aright, to mourn aright, to rejoice aright, etc., but such wisdom must be brought to nothing, 1 Cor. 1:19. and a man must become a child to all knowledge for him to know God's way. But the one that becomes such a child is taught to pray, to believe, to wait, to hope, and all that is necessary to eternal life.

Now as the Father teaches to pray, so he gives desires or words (if he please) according to the present need. Sometimes he gives but the ability to sigh or groan (and if he give no more, he accepts that). Sometimes he gives strong breathings and plenty of words to pour out the soul before the Lord. But if a man should hear and remember those words, and lay them up for another time, and offer them up to God in his own will, this would be but will-worship and abomination. This I have known experientially, and have felt the wrath of God for it. Prayer is

that which comes fresh from the Spirit, and the true desire is that which the Spirit begets. But the affections and sparks of man's own kindling do not please the Lord, nor do they conduce to the soul's rest, but will end in the bed of sorrow. Isa. 50:11.

Now concerning the use of the Book of Common Prayer, or concerning prayers conceived in the mind without the immediate breathings of the Spirit, I will speak my own experience faithfully, which is this: I have felt both of these draw out from me the wrong part, and keep that alive in me which the true prayer kills. And he that utters a word beyond the sense which God begets in his spirit takes God's name in vain, and provokes him to jealousy against his own soul. "God is in heaven, you are on earth, therefore let thy words be few." The few words which the Spirit speaks, or the few still, soft, gentle breathings which the Spirit begets, are pleasing to God, and profitable to the soul. But the many words which man's wisdom conceives hurt the precious life, and thicken the veil of death over the soul, keeping that thing alive which separates from God, that which must die so that the soul can live.

True prayer comes by that which God begets in the virtue of his Spirit, ("praying always in the Spirit," Eph. 6:18. Jude 20) in the time he chooses. For the Spirit breathes when he wishes and where he wishes, and man cannot limit when he will breathe, or when he will not breathe. But man is to watch for the Spirit's breathing, and so to "watch unto prayer."

Now if the prayer be in words, (for there is a praying without words) then it must be in those words which the Spirit pleases to give, from the sense which he kindles, and not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, or would choose to use. And indeed, in true Christianity, and in every exercise of it, man's wisdom is kept out, and nailed to the cross, by which means the immortal life is raised and increases in the true disciple. The disciple of Christ believes, he hopes, he waits, he prays, he mourns, he rejoices, he obeys, etc., abiding in the cross to all that is mortal. He does these things not as man's wisdom teaches, but as the life teaches, as the wisdom from above teaches, which breaks down, shuts up, confounds and destroys man's wisdom.