

A simple way to begin the day with prayer

by
Richard J. Foster

PRAYER IS *not* another duty to add onto an already busy life—it is a living, vibrant reality which infiltrates the daily junctures of our ordinary tasks. But how is this done? Most of us desperately need models that will help us transform our stained-glass Christianity into everyday experience. We who are in the Christian fellowship would help each other immensely if we would be willing to share our learning and growing in the laboratory of faith. To this end I want to share with you two small experiments I do to bring prayer into the daily routine of my mornings.

Prayerful Waking

In recent months I have been giving special attention to that period in the morning when I am just waking up—I am not fully asleep but neither am I yet fully awake. I am trying to see if I can pray during that period. I am seeking to lift myself into the arms of Christ, giving Him my will and emotions, my schemes and dreams. As best I can I want to give Him the day and whatever it will bring. The day is not mine to control or order. It belongs to Him. Every meeting, every phone call, every chance encounter are His to manage and to use for His good purposes.

Please understand, I am not praying verbally or even mentally for I am not yet fully awake. No, it is an inner, almost subconscious entering into a proper ordering of reality. God is sovereign King and gracious Friend who will bring events into my day that advance His kingdom and are for my good. I receive the day as a gift from the hand of the Father. Of course, as I begin to wake up my prayer is mingled with words but I often

'I discovered that my jogging could be an appointment with God'



discover that by the time I have come to the stage of using words, I am aware that inner communion has already been occurring. There is already a sense of God's love surrounding me, a sense that graciously He has agreed to take charge of the day.

All of this is done in an easy, almost light-hearted manner, for if I were too serious about it all, I would quickly become discouraged. I have plenty of days when I wake up grumpy or groggy and certainly less than spiritual. But rather than grumble about my failures I find it much better to center on those times when I seem to awaken in the milieu of the Holy Spirit. Such experiences I want to receive as a gift with no need to

demand that every morning be that way but glad for those that are.

Prayerful Jogging

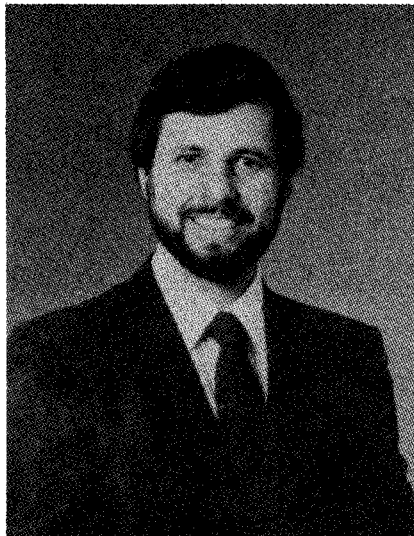
My second little experiment in prayer occurs as I jog in the morning before work. Before I learned to bring prayer into my jogging, the running was a rather wearysome and somewhat boring task. But when I began to realize that it could be an appointment with God, it transformed my entire outlook. Before, I would jog a certain distance and always the final laps would drag on for an eternity. But then the thought occurred to me that I could jog for as long as I needed to pray and so my communion with the Father was placed at the heart of my experience.

I begin by singing inwardly various hymns that will help me to center my attention on the Lord. I try to bring my singing into rhythm with my jogging. (If you saw how I ran you would know that these have to be very slow hymns!) After singing and worshipping for a while I may hold before my conscious mind Isaiah's great vision of the Lord high and lifted up whose train fills the Temple. Such experiences can often lead into inward humility and confession and perhaps times of adoration and exaltation.

When I feel that I am in tune with God's ways and in step with His purposes, I begin the work of prayer. For me this starts with prayers of protection for each member of the family. As a husband and father I am keenly aware of the special responsibility I have for the precious ones that are a gracious gift from God to me.

And so I begin with Carolynn, my wife, surrounding her with the strong light of Christ, covering her with His blood and sealing her with His cross. Next I will pray for Joel, our energetic junior higher, and pray for him in the same vein, all the time seeking to visualize him surrounded with a great barrier of holy light four feet thick so that nothing can reach him except that it first pass through the Light. Finally I lift up into God's love and care our grade school son, Nathan ("Nate the Great" to his friends). Again I picture him surrounded with the Light of Christ, covered with the blood of Christ, and sealed with the cross of Christ.

I sometimes think of these protective prayers for the boys as preventive medicine. Often I can imagine them in their classrooms at the public school being protected from influences and ideas and associations that would be unhealthy. I picture, for example, people involved with drugs simply passing by the boys. I see Joel and Nathan's minds alert to see through the faulty assumptions of non-Christian world views. I imagine them



meeting teachers and students who would encourage them to reach beyond their present grasp. These and many similar ideas keep those little prayers of protection from becoming wooden legalisms.

And in reality these little prayers of protection are far more dynamic experiences than might be assumed at first. Once while praying for Carolynn I received a strong image of a huge glass encasement coming down and surrounding her and then I saw certain strong emotions being hurled at her but each one would bounce off the glass and she was untouched. The image was new to me but seemed appropriate for her and so I sought to pray the visualization into her spirit. The image was repeated for nearly two weeks (most uncommon for me) almost as if it were a preparation for something. Following that experience there occurred the tragic death of our pastor, a very personal friend and colleague. Carolynn is a very sensitive person and such events can wound her deeply, but in this situation she seemed to be able to respond with uncommon grace and balance. We have since wondered if the prayer experience I had had earlier wasn't a gracious preparation for the event that followed.

Prayerful Listening

Following prayer for the family (and any others I may be drawn to undertake), I seek to enter into a

conversational and listening mode. I am sharing any concerns that I may have with the Lord, but most of all I am wanting to listen for directives and impressions from the true Shepherd. Perhaps I will think of the day before me and ask for Divine perspective on those events. I may sense the need to write a letter of encouragement to someone, or to take up a special task, or to let go of some task. At times there comes a sense of entering into the feelings of a fellow worker or neighbor so as to pray for and relate to them better. Most of all I'm listening, worshipping, adoring. I'm longing to know by experience what Thomas à Kempis meant when he spoke of a "familiar friendship with Jesus." And, of course, this is at the heart of our prayer experience. Answers to prayer are wonderful, glorious footnotes to the main task which is to love God and to enjoy Him forever.

What I have just described to you is all done within the context of a little period of physical exercise. It is not meant in any way to replace other times of study and devotion which you may have. It is simply one illustration of how we can practice the presence of God in the midst of ordinary activity. You will, I am sure, be drawn into many other ways to experience Christ's promise "lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

Note: Dr. Richard Foster graciously offered this writing to the editor in chief while they were jogging together in the early morning along an Indiana farm road, both serving on the staff of the Christian Writers Conference at Marion College. Thus this writing is published for the first time and will be followed with a series by Dr. Foster on Sexuality and Spirituality, excerpted from his latest book.

Dr. Foster is author of *Celebration of Discipline, Freedom of Simplicity, Money, Sex and Power* and subject of a four-part film series based on *Celebration of Discipline*. He is Associate Professor of Theology and Writer in Residence at Friends University in Wichita, KA.