

There is perhaps no more important spiritual discipline that Christians wish they were more consistent in exercising than prayer. Many believers recognize a deficiency in their prayer lives but are at a loss to know how to make any serious progress toward consistent growth. In *Persistent Prayer*, Guy M. Richard carefully teaches on biblical prayer from both the Old and New Testaments, asking the reader practical and engaging questions. This book will encourage you to seek the God who loves to hear and answer the prayers of those who pour their hearts out before him.

—**Nick Batzig**, Associate Editor, Ligonier Ministries;
Senior Pastor, Church Creek Presbyterian, Charleston

It sounds axiomatic, but God answers prayer. If for no other reason, we should pray more. Guy Richard offers to the church a clear and encouraging path to reclaim and revive prayer as the grace of pleading with God. Honestly, I don't pray as much or as earnestly as I should. I fear most would give a similar confession. Yet this book does not indict as much as it encourages. It is written not from the lofty perches of the academy but from the humble heart of one hungry to know God. When you read this book, you will find one who—like you—struggles to pray and yet rejoices to know that God graciously welcomes and answers our prayers.

—**Anthony J. Carter**, Lead Pastor, East Point Church, East Point, Georgia; Coauthor, *Dying to Speak: Meditations from the Cross*

Guy Richard's book on prayer may be small, but its impact on the heart is mighty. It not only encourages but also equips the reader to cry out to God in prayer. Be prepared: after reading this book, you'll want to pray big, God-honoring prayers.

—**Christina Fox**, Author, *A Holy Fear: Trading Lesser Fears for the Fear of the Lord*

I love this book! In an inviting and compelling way, *Persistent Prayer* captures the desperate, urgent need we have to pray. As you read through these pages, you will find yourself encouraged and inspired to talk to God. Thank you, Guy, for giving us such clear answers, anchored in the Scriptures, for why we should pray. What a gift.

—**Crawford W. Loritts Jr.**, Author; Speaker; Radio Host

Most Christians know that we should pray, that we ought to pray, that we need to pray. What we really need sometimes is a wise mentor to encourage us along the way so that we actually take up the practice of prayer. Guy Richard is such a mentor. Graciously, winsomely, compellingly, he prods us along the path of lifting our desires to our good and gracious God, knowing that he does, and will, answer our prayers for his glory. Here's a rich source of encouragement to spend time with our loving God!

—**Sean Michael Lucas**, Senior Pastor, Independent Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee; Chancellor's Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary

We don't believe in the power of prayer—we believe in the power of God, and that is why we pray. This book by Dr. Guy Richard helps us to understand what prayer is and why we pray. Having served as a faithful pastor for many years, Dr. Richard beautifully weaves together his pastoral wisdom and his academic experience to provide all Christians with a clear and accessible book to help us to grasp that prayer is more about communing with God than simply talking to God.

—**Burk Parsons**, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrews Chapel,
Sanford, Florida; Editor, *Tabletalk*

PERSISTENT
PRAYER

BLESSINGS OF THE FAITH

A Series

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**PERSISTENT
PRAYER**

GUY M. RICHARD


P U B L I S H I N G
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For Tim Murr and Al Chestnut, fellow elders in the Presbyterian Church in America and faithful brothers in Christ, who have encouraged me and set before me an example of heartfelt and heart-filled prayer. I am grateful for your influence in my life.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Kevin DeYoung	9
Introduction: The Blessing of Prayer	13
1. The Nature of Prayer	19
2. Prayer Works	39
3. Prayer Is Necessary	61
4. Growing in Prayer	79
Questions and Answers on Prayer	89
Recommended Resources	127
Notes	129

FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things “decently and in order.” I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced “New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks”). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before “decently and in order” was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul’s injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered

like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably: "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."¹

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series

delivers: wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

Kevin DeYoung
Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church
Matthews, North Carolina

Introduction

THE BLESSING OF PRAYER

Sixteen years ago, I experienced something that forced me to look at prayer and my own practice of it much more closely than I ever had before. That something was Hurricane Katrina. The destruction and upheaval it left in its wake drove me and many others around me to devote ourselves to prayer in ways that we had not previously.

In August 2005, about two months after I accepted the call to serve as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Gulfport, Mississippi, and about two months before I planned to arrive and officially start, Hurricane Katrina destroyed the entire church facility and the homes of nearly sixty families in the congregation. Almost everyone living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast was affected by the storm: some lost their homes, some lost their businesses, some lost their churches, and some lost all three. The devastation was absolutely incredible. It will remain etched in my mind for as long as I am alive. The whole area looked like a war zone. What remained of people's homes and possessions was scattered everywhere as far as

the eye could see. Huge craters were so widespread along the beachfront highway that it looked like the whole place had been carpet-bombed. Approximately thirty families in the church had nothing but a foundation left to their homes. Another thirty families had homes that were still intact but had been damaged by having anywhere from seven to seventeen feet of water in them for days on end in the sweltering summer heat.

As a not-yet-ordained recent seminary graduate, I had absolutely no idea what to do in this situation. If there was a class in seminary on how to lead a church that had experienced this kind of devastation, I had obviously missed it. I was in over my head, and I knew it.

Looking back now, I see that the whole situation was a severe mercy from the Lord in so many ways. It taught me important lessons about myself, about ministry, and about the church. But, more importantly, it drove me to pray. The elders of the church called the congregation to join us in prayer and fasting. We pleaded with the Lord to hear our prayers and to provide the wisdom, the finances, the know-how, and the peace and unity that we needed to move forward. And you know what? The Lord provided. He answered our prayers, many of them visibly for all to see. It was a high-water mark in the life of the congregation, to be sure. In many ways, it was a high-water mark in my life too.

Much of the material in this book is the fruit of those early years after the hurricane. My hope is that it will be

helpful for everyone who takes it up. My hope is that it will teach us more about prayer. But what I really want is for it to encourage and motivate us to give ourselves more fully to the practice of prayer. The hurricane helped me to see what a blessing prayer is in the Christian life and how important it is for us to be praying with persistence. It is my desire that this book would do the same thing for you.

How Is Prayer a Blessing?

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, God routinely answered our congregation's prayers in very visible ways. Over and over again, we had needs that we couldn't meet ourselves, and we had nowhere else to turn for help. So we prayed, frequently with great desperation, and we saw God answer time and again in ways that clearly showed us he was providing for us.

That is one of the greatest blessings of prayer. You and I get to see God work, and when we do, our faith is strengthened and our resolve to pray is increased. To be sure, God doesn't need our prayers. As the sovereign God of the universe, he is able to do all things at all times all by himself. But he stoops down to use our prayers as means to accomplish his perfect purposes. You and I, therefore, have the tremendous privilege of being coworkers with the God of the universe when we pray. And that is a blessing indeed.

Yet prayer is a blessing not only because it strengthens our faith when we see God answer and because it bestows upon us the wonderful privilege of being coworkers with God but because it gives us recourse in times of trouble. Joseph Scriven has captured this idea so beautifully in his well-known hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

What a Friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.
Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged:
take it to the Lord in prayer!¹

In the midst of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, we realized anew and afresh that we had access to someone who could actually do something to help, someone who not only held all power and authority but was also altogether gracious and compassionate toward us, someone who loved us and was for us forevermore in Christ. That, too, is a tremendous blessing, and it belongs to every Christian in and through prayer.

The Importance of Prayer

Even the most mature Christians struggle with prayer from time to time. We forget the blessing it provides. We lose sight of its importance. We allow urgent things to push important things like prayer to the periphery of our lives—until a storm or a difficult providence enters our experience and reorients our priorities.

Hurricane Katrina had that effect in my life and in the lives of many of God's people who were living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast at the time. All of a sudden, our world was turned upside down. Everything was taken away. Basic necessities, like food and water, became our most pressing needs. We could no longer hop in the car and run down to the local grocery store, because we didn't have gasoline to drive (it became as precious as gold), and, even if we did, none of the stores were open anyway. All we had was prayer. It seems strange now to say that. Prayer, theologically speaking, is never a last resort for us as Christians. But, experientially, it oftentimes is such in our actual practice.

The hurricane reminded me and many others of how crucial prayer is in the Christian life. It showed us that prayer is indispensable because of what it is, because of what it does, and because of how necessary it is in the Christian life. In an effort to motivate believers to give ourselves to persistent prayer, this book will devote a chapter to discussing each of these factors. Why should we pray? I invite you to join me as we seek to answer this question together.

1

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

I love exercise. Those who know me well know that this is true. But I have come to learn through the years that my definition of what constitutes exercise is different from most people's. For me, exercise involves as much pain as possible. I enjoy the pain, or, more accurately, I enjoy the challenge of not succumbing to it and of pushing myself to go faster, harder, or farther than I thought I could. I have several close friends, however, who see what I have described as being more like torture than exercise, and because they see it this way, they cannot understand why anyone in his or her right mind would want to subject himself or herself to it on a regular basis. My friends would all acknowledge that exercise offers clear health benefits for those who take it up, but when it is understood in the way that I have defined it, they not only want no part of it themselves but even question my sanity for giving my time and energy to it.

How we define something is closely connected with our understanding of why we should (or shouldn't) do it.

This is true of exercise, and it's also true of prayer. If we think of prayer as simply having a conversation with God, then we will probably struggle more with why we should do it than if we think of it as something as essential as eating or breathing. No one has to tell us to eat or breathe. We know these activities are essential to life. I am convinced that when we understand what prayer is, we will see better why we should give ourselves to it wholeheartedly.

Finding a Definition for Prayer

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines prayer as “an offering up of our desires unto God” and then adds several phrases that qualify what kind of “desires” we should be “offering up”: “for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.”¹ If we take this definition at face value, we might come away thinking that prayer is merely asking God for things (it’s “an offering up of our desires unto God”). But this is not at all what the authors of the Shorter Catechism intended. We know this because of the Scripture proof text that they added to support and confirm their assertion—Psalm 62:8,² which says, “Trust in him at all times, O people; *pour out your heart before him*; God is a refuge for us.”

Of all the passages the writers of the catechism could have chosen to demonstrate that prayer is “an offering up of our desires unto God,” why did they select one

that speaks about pouring out the heart? Why didn't they choose Revelation 5:8, which likens "the prayers of the saints" in heaven to "golden bowls full of incense"? That would certainly seem to capture the idea of prayer as an "offering" better than Psalm 62:8 does. Why not John 16:23–24, Philippians 4:6, or 1 John 5:15—all of which refer to prayer in terms of requests that we present to God? These passages would also seem to do a better job at proving that prayer is "an offering up of our desires unto God." Why Psalm 62:8?

I believe the divines chose Psalm 62:8 because they were thinking of prayer as something more than simply making requests to God. This proof text tells us that the authors of the Shorter Catechism regarded prayer primarily as "pour[ing] out [our] heart[s] before [God]." The word that has frequently been used to communicate this idea is the word *pleading*.³ We plead with God in prayer when we pour out our hearts before him. We earnestly implore him to hear us and to answer from heaven. We do this not just with our words but also with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is what the authors of the Shorter Catechism meant when they defined prayer as an "offering up of our desires unto God." The selection of the proof text tells us as much.

The Psalms frequently speak of prayer in similar terms. Thus we read that the psalmists "cry" out to the Lord, "lift up [their] soul" to him, "call upon" him, and "plead" with him for mercy and grace (see Pss. 17; 86;

102; 142—all of which are explicitly titled prayers). Moreover, they often use the words *prayer* and *plea* in parallel, thereby indicating a great deal of overlap if not outright synonymy (see Pss. 6:9; 86:6; 142:1–2; 143:1). Even when the psalmists are not explicitly praying, they still address the Lord in ways that reflect a pouring out of their hearts before him. Here I am thinking particularly of passages like Psalm 9:1–2, in which David pours out his heart in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord:

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart;

I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.

I will be glad and exult in you;

I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

Besides these psalms, other passages in Scripture suggest that prayer is a whole-souled pleading with the Lord. Hannah, in 1 Samuel 1, is described as “pouring out [her] soul before the LORD” (v. 15). Solomon, in his prayer of dedication for the newly built temple, routinely uses the words *prayer* and *plea* interchangeably (see 1 Kings 8:28, 30, 33, 38, 44–45, 47–49, 54). In the New Testament, moreover, we see prayer presented as “heart pleading” in passages like Matthew 9:38, Luke 22:31–32, and Acts 4:31—all of which use a word for prayer (*deomai* in the Greek) that is most frequently translated “beg” or “implore” and that, in most cases, explicitly involves an earnestness that comes from the heart.⁴

The most obvious support in the New Testament for seeing prayer as pleading, however, comes from Jesus's teaching on prayer in Luke 11:5–10. In this passage, Jesus gives an example of a man who has no food to set before a friend who is visiting from out of town. Even though it is midnight, the man ventures out to try to borrow some food for his friend.⁵ Driven by desperation, he doesn't simply "offer up his desires" in a clinical fashion. He doesn't just nonchalantly ask his neighbor for food; he asks, and he seeks, and he knocks, and he keeps on persisting until he receives what he so desperately needs (in verses 9–10, note the present tense is used in each case, showing continuous action). Thus Jesus teaches us that prayer is pleading that is motivated by a need that we cannot meet ourselves and that we desperately want God to supply for us. It is this kind of heartfelt and heart-filled prayer that Jesus says will be answered by the Lord (vv. 8–10)—a subject that we will take up in the next chapter.

Prayer Is Heart Work

If prayer involves pouring out our hearts to God, then we can see immediately why we should be engaging in it. We should do so precisely *because* it involves our hearts. The Bible everywhere teaches us that God is concerned chiefly about matters of the heart (see Gen. 6:5; 1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 6:21; 12:34; Acts 15:8). This is especially