



The Struggle of Prayer – a Short Practical Guide



If you ask anyone in church about prayer they will most likely use a descriptor like: a pleasant experience, a conversation with God, a link with the absolute or other general terms, all positive in nature. Things are different however when, during Confession, a Father Confessor asks the same question. He will most likely hear more about lack of time, loss of focus, procrastination and struggle in general. The truth is that prayer is easier said than done.

One of the main reasons that we struggle with prayer is that we expect from it a different experience that what we actually get in most cases. Reading books like [The Way of the pilgrim](#) or the *Filokalia* we may get a wrong impression of what prayer is, at least at the beginning, because we forget that the wonderful experiences described in these books belong to people that have literally struggled with prayer their entire lives. We all expect an exhilarating time rejoicing in the Lord while our souls are taken to the 3rd heaven. Well, this does not happen for the majority of us.

Jesus Christ Himself prayed while on earth and not all His periods of prayer were a “walk-in-the-park” kind of experience. Take for instance the prayer in the garden of Gethesemane: *“And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”* (Luk 22:44). There was pain in His prayer but as He struggled in prayer His prayer became more profound, reaching out from the bottom of His human nature screaming for help and deliverance.

The same is true for us: we tend to pray harder and with more seriousness when we face suffering. In suffering we genuinely pray, there is no more habitual, casual prayer, there is real purpose behind it. The problem is how do we transfer these rare moments of honest prayer into our daily praying routine?



The reason we pray honestly in suffering is that we have a goal that is acute, that we desire with our entire being. Shouldn't we however have the same desire for the things we automatically recite during the morning or evening prayers? Shouldn't we pray as hard for the salvation of our souls that we pray for the health of our bodies? Of course, but for many of us the soul is abstract, theoretical while the body is tangible and concrete. We are more affected by what we receive through our senses than what we are promised in the Scriptures.

Prayer is undoubtedly one of the most difficult ascetic exercises because it requires a combination of faith, will, perseverance and patience that is very difficult to achieve. Prayer requires a learning curve that cannot be skipped. We cannot reach the vision of God and partake in the uncreated light in our first hour of prayer, but this is rather achieved along with the other Christian virtues, so as the soul is cleansed of sin it also becomes light and more likely to reach up to the Lord.

So how do we learn how to pray? A father from the Desert was asked by a novice "*Abba, how do I pray?*" *The father answered "Pray and the prayer will teach you everything."*

Of course this profound answer will not satisfy some of our the contemporary Christian brothers so here are some hints for the beginner.

The first and necessary step is to create a minimal **daily routine**. The usual excuse I am too busy to pray does not stand anymore when Americans watch an average of 4-5 hours of TV per day. Reaching consistency is the most important goal.

Spiritual "warm-up": reading from the Scripture, writings of the Holy Fathers on prayer, virtues and repentance are all building blocks of an increased appetite for prayer.

Creating a **praying atmosphere**: icons, candle light, incense, prayer bids all contribute to the sublimation of the senses and focus toward the inner kingdom

In the Orthodox Faith the prayer should also **involve both the spirit and the body**. Kneeling or standing, bowing the head, raising hands, making prostrations are means by which our body is actively participating in the prayer act.

Set reasonable expectations. In a society that enjoys instant gratification on a daily basis one can easily be deceived by the answer they get in prayer. Most people don't have the patience anymore to wait for God's response, and abandon prayer after a couple of "failed" attempts. Learning to accept God's will is the answer to this problem. This theme is present in the typical Orthodox Prayers as for example in the following prayer addressed to the Theotokos:

"O my gracious Queen, my hope, Birthgiver of God, who receive the poor and help the travelers; joy of those who sorrow, shelter for the oppressed; Behold my affliction and see my needs. Help me as you would one in despair; feed me as you would a stranger. You know all my troubles, absolve them according to your will, for I have no other help but you, no other ready shelter or comfort but you, O Mother of God, to help me and protect me unto ages of ages. Amen." ([Morning Prayers](#))

Don't look for mystical experiences. Most of the Fathers warn the novices against extraordinary visions



and experiences that may have a dubious origin. The Desert Father's collections are rich in stories about young monks deceived by the devil who lures them into the false mystical encounters. Accepting them only attracts pride and a false sense of achievement. Prayer is not a competition, it is a serious matter between us and God.

Prayer cannot exist in a vacuum, cut-off from the other things necessary for a pious life. Prayer needs to be linked with repentance, humility, charity and fasting. Only in this holy company the prayer will flourish and fill our life with the asweet aroma of the Holy Spirit. *“Whatever you have endured out of love of wisdom will bear fruit for you at the time of prayer.”* (From the [Sayings of the Holy Fathers](#))

In the end prayer is an encounter with God, is building up a personal relationship that needs nurturing and perseverance. The more we communicate the closer we become to the other Person and the conversation becomes more rewarding every time.

Prayer is a conversation directly with God, being always with God, having one's soul united with Him and one's mind inseparable. A person becomes one with the angels and unites with them in perpetual praise and longing for God. – St. Symeon of Thessaloniki

Source: [Gladsome Light Dialogues Blog](#)