

Special Section: Prayer—The Language Of Love

Soul Talk

Real prayer means baring our souls to God.

By Gordon MacDonald

A couple of years ago I spent ten days solo-hiking in the Swiss Alps. Other than negotiating the price of sleeping space in an alpine mountain hut or an occasional “I-greet-you-in-the-name-of-God” to a passing walker, I don’t think I engaged in any other conversation for the entire time.

Ten days of virtual aloneness is no small learning experience. Enveloped in enforced quietness, one is likely to move in the direction of the soul rather than the many noise-centers on the periphery of life. On alpine paths there are no portable stereos, no cellular phones, no persuasion messages from signs, and no million-and-one people clamoring for our attention. Apart from beautiful views, there is nothing more than what we can find in the inner person.

This intense experience of going inward can be a surprising and unnerving one. Frankly, I was not prepared for it. If anyone had ever told me what could happen in such aloneness, I did not hear them. I made two discoveries during this inward journey toward my soul.

True Worship

First, I found how natural it could be—as a Christ-follower—to worship. Once I knew there would be no external distractions, I began to see things in a new light. I found it relatively easy to look at cloud formations, wildflowers in mountain meadows, and majestic snowcapped vistas and cry out to God with thanksgiving for such remarkable glory.

Sounds like the large, mellow bells hanging around the necks of cows were like a choir whose corporate song is unvarnished praise. Water crashing down a slab of vertical rock reminded me of heavenly power and strength. Smells like newly-cut grass from a farmer’s sickle seemed so clean and symbolic of the freshness of a “mercied” heart.

The aloneness also encouraged a bevy of recollections. Of friends for whom I am very grateful. Of a family who brings me continual joy. Of the opportunities to preach the Bible and encourage the development of people in Christlikeness. “It doesn’t get any better than this,” I heard myself say, as I counted my unmerited blessings and reviewed my life.

In my stillness I found everything to be a cause for praise and worship to the Creator whose glory is reflected in all of this. Anyone who had seen me from a distance might have concluded I was a bit crazy. For I would occasionally stop my walk, kneel in the grass, lift my arms toward Heaven, and speak aloud to the Father in exaltation. Who could have understood such antics if they had not wire-tapped my soul?

Unfortunately, that’s not the whole story. My aloneness paved the way for a second set of thoughts: It caused me to rediscover personal darkness.

Heart Disclosures

In isolation my mind jumped easily from rapturous praise to the most negative thoughts. Events covering almost fifty years of life began to crowd through my mind like a parade. Memories of old angers and resentments, issues I thought had long been settled, sadnesses and regrets. From nowhere came self-accusations and base ambitions that had no business being in the soul of one who thought he'd long-since encountered Christ at the cross.

People can talk about transparency, vulnerability, honesty, and loving self-disclosure all they want, but some of this stuff from the dark and depth of my soul was not the sort of thing I'd want anyone to know about. What emerged was enough to cause me to drop to the grass—not to worship, but to repent—and repeat the words of St. Paul, “O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?”

You can picture my increasing consternation. I felt as if I were standing on a mental and spiritual continental divide. Turn to the left, and I was exulting in the living God and His glory with something near ecstasy. Turn to the right, and I was groveling in a cesspool of thought patterns that were terrible to behold.

I found how infinitely deep is the soul of a person, how much capacity there is in all of us to lean toward righteousness or evil. What happened in the upper meadows and the mountain passes is what happens when people begin to pray seriously. The light of God's glory becomes vividly bright, and the darkness of the uncleaned soul becomes remarkably dark.

Authentic Prayer

I came to realize that my Swiss hike was as close to prolonged prayer as I may ever experience in this part of my eternal life. I got in touch with something so profound that I can only call it authentic prayer in order to set it off from the kind of ordinary, often meaningless prayer I hear coming from myself when I'm going through the motions.

Most of my prayers, the unauthentic kind, have not had either the intensity or duration that would stimulate the sort of soul-revealing experience I had in Switzerland.

I've been bothered by this, and I've tried hard to do something about it. I am only marginally successful, tempted sometimes to discouragement, but glad there is a prompting within me to keep on pursuing it.

Authentic prayer of any kind is the talk of the soul. When one truly prays, he or she—to use psalm-language—lifts up the soul. We only have to consider the lives of biblical personalities to realize that almost everything they did of Kingdom significance followed the exercise of serious prayer.

What Christ-follower of evangelical persuasion does not agree with that and talk about it? And that is more than part of the problem. We are part of a community that talks a lot about prayer but does relatively little of it. Little soul-talk. And we do what I'm trying to avoid doing in this writing: We preach to each other about how important prayer is and why we should be doing it. Then we go off and do something else, feeling that just by talking about prayer and its importance we've relieved ourselves of the responsibility of being prayerful people.

The Swiss Alps experience is not the only time I've had these unusual moments when prayer was so natural that it seemed the only sensible thing to do. Take, for example, the night during a Kansas blizzard when our one-month-old son burned with fever. I held him toward Heaven and begged God to lower that fever. I poured out my soul with a passion I am reluctant to describe. And God heard my prayer.

Or the days when I faced my own personal sinfulness and lifted a darkened heart to God asking for His mercy. Again, the passion of tearful soul-talk. The no-holds-barred groaning of the inner being that suddenly realizes a sorrow no other can share.

There were unforgettable days when I faced a decision that seemed ten times larger than me. No human wisdom, advice, or decision-making tree seemed to help. Exhausted, I came to God asking for insight that only Heaven can offer. Those were times when I knew the edges of soul-talk.

All of us can probably point to a handful of times like those. But why is it that we resort to soul-talk more as the exception than the rule?

Soul-Talk Requires Solitude

First, soul-talk—authentic prayer—almost never happens apart from silence with minimal external distractions. I've found exceptions in Scripture: Peter's cry, "Save me," on the Galilean waters was definitely soul-talk, but it certainly wasn't voiced in a context of silence. Elijah seems to have stepped away from a crowd on Mt. Carmel, yet his conversation with God seems very personal, very hush-hush.

Nevertheless, silence is more the proper environment for soul-talk. One can easily envision that our modern culture has been guided, in an evil sense, to deny us the necessary silence to move toward authentic prayer, since Satan hates to see us on our knees before God. Television, incessant musical backgrounds, cellular phones, the visual chatter of our computers and faxes, and our network of relationships are not inducements to silence. If we succumb to the seduction of noise, we will never experience prayer that can be described as soul-talk. Mind-talk, perhaps. Emotion-talk, maybe. But not the kind of soul-talk that energizes worship and sharpens our view of the world while exposing personal evil.

Soul-Talk Takes Time

Time is a second element. We need a period of preparatory time before our souls are ready to engage in heavenly intimacy. I imagine the soul as something that hides from all the noise and busyness of life. Can I suggest that it has to be coaxed into action? And the coaxing may take time that most of us do not think we have.

I don't think my soul really swung into significant motion in Switzerland for at least two to three days. When it finally got the message that I was alone and quiet, it never seemed to want to stop speaking . . . both from the dark and the bright sides.

We have all been taught the importance of daily prayer. But I suspect we could profit more from a weekly experience of three or four prayerful hours than just a few minutes each day. It's not a fair comparison, perhaps, but my intuition suggests that I'm "righter-than-wronger" about this.

Soul-Talk from the Past

A third element has to do with deriving assistance from that body of saints called the spiritual masters. Many of them wrote wonderful prayers and meditations as they engaged in soul-talk. Most of them had time we do not have, silence we've been denied, and the encouragement of a culture that expected some people to make soul-talk their vocation.

Augustine's *Confessions* and the "Imitations" of Thomas à Kempis are two examples of men who made soul-talk their vocation. The *Book of Common Prayer*, the prayers of John Baillee (a more modern personality), the writings of A.W. Tozer, the insights of Faber, Fénelon, Teresa of

Avila, and St. John of the Cross come to mind. Oswald Chambers' *My Utmost for His Highest*, Amy Carmichael's challenges, and John Wesley's hymns—all are soul-talk in one way or another. They pull and tug at the soul, provide it a language and thought-forms with which to speak a quiet word to the Father. And how can we forget the psalms as a source of soul-talk?

Some of us were raised to avoid these sorts of writings. We were told to “pray from the heart.” But there are days when my heart (or my soul) feels empty; it simply has nothing to say. And like the priming of a pump, the words and insights of the spiritual masters get things going again. Just as the composer offers a melody and words to express joy, so the spiritual greats can give us prayers to express what we may find inexpressible.

Soul-Talk on Paper

I have also found journaling to be a great aid to soul-talk. On those days when coldness has been more than a matter of New England temperatures, I have found myself unable to produce a coherent word from soul-level. That's when my journal helps me. “Modern” that I am, I journal into my computer, and I have learned to write and describe to the Father in journal form my hardness of soul and spirit. Usually, after three or more paragraphs of frank talk, I find the inner stone begins to break up.

My journals are full of things for which I'm thankful, hosts of things about which I'm embarrassed, and a veritable catalog of hopes for my friends and congregation.

Waiting on God

A last pertinent element in soul-talk is patience—the ability to wait. When I was younger, my impatience was (by comparison) troublesome. I would privately observe to my wife that I saw little connection between my prayers and the results. This was the conclusion of a small thinker with too few years of life under his belt, one who could not see things over the long haul.

Today is different. Fifty-plus years is not exactly a long view, but it is long enough to realize that what one says from the soul must be cast in the perspective of eternity, the promises and purposes of God. I am praying prayers that may not have their answer until long after I'm in the grave. And that's okay. I now know that God has never been oblivious of one word I've spoken from the soul in His direction. The timing is His; the patience must be mine.

This Mysterious One to whom we direct our souls moves with agonizing slowness on some days and with lightning speed on others. In soul-talk we lay no demands, no time-lines, and no measurements before Him. We bow, speak the language of the soul, and then wait, often without telling others what we wait for. Conversation from soul to Heaven is enough.

I am bothered by the thought that silence, time, touch with the spiritual ancients, self-disclosure in a journal, and patience are not commodities in great supply today. In part, that is why our prayers may take the form of shallow words, empty clichés, quick-burst comments, and religious soliloquies.

Give me soul-talk any time! Ten words of it are worth a thousand of the other kind. Soul-talk is that which comes from the bottom of our inner world. It is where God is likely to dwell through union in Christ, and we reach for His grace. It is where we look at Creation and its possibilities with fresh eyes and worship. It is where we come to understand that every minute spent in the Divine Presence is worth infinitely more than gold.

» See Also: *On Your Own: Afraid Of The Light?*

» See Also: *Sidebar: 5 Misconceptions That Hinder Prayer*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

GORDON MACDONALD says, "The most influential person in my Christian life has been my wife, Gail, because of her remarkable ability to be grace-giving, consistent in her desire to love God, and her genuine passion to serve people."

On Your Own
Afraid Of The Light?

Some of us may read “Soul Talk” and long for an encounter of worship and brokenness similar to Gordon MacDonald’s. For others of us, the very thought of facing our inner darkness is terrifying. We’d prefer to limit just how much of God’s light we allow to shine on our troubled souls.

1. Read Psalm 139. How does it describe God’s knowledge of your inner being?

How does it describe God’s relationship to you?

2. How do the following verses describe the blessings and benefits of transparency and brokenness?

Psalm 25:8–9

Psalm 32:3–5

Psalm 34:4–5; Psalm 34:18

Psalm 40:1–3

Proverbs 28:13

Joel 2:13