

Part 1
**Sweet Hours of Prayer:
How Fixed Hour Prayer Nourishes the Soul**

Ruth Haley Barton

“At last I believe that life itself is a prayer, and the prayers we say shape the lives we live just as the lives we live shape the prayers we say.” --Ted Loder

The first time I participated in fixed hour prayer, I felt like I had come home to a place I had never been and yet a place in which I truly belonged. It was a simple evening prayer service signaling the beginning of a spiritual retreat with a few likeminded souls. One of our group had experience with fixed hour prayer and prepared a simple liturgy using prayers from the Psalms, a reading from the Gospels, and written prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer* and *The Upper Room Worshipbook*. We set aside a simple prayer space. We entered that space in silence. We lit a candle to signify Christ’s presence with us through the Holy Spirit. And then we prayed the prayers provided for us beginning with these words:

*From the rising of the sun to its setting,
Let the name of the Lord be praised.
YOU, O LORD, ARE MY LAMP.
MY GOD, YOU MAKE MY DARKNESS BRIGHT.
Light and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.
THANKS BE TO GOD.¹*

Some of the prayers were read in unison, some were read responsively—and I just lost myself in the beauty and simplicity of it all. Instead of having to work hard to think up some words to pray, I simply gave myself to the beauty of words that expressed deep longings and powerful praises that were true in me but I could never have found the words to say. Instead of getting caught up in the ego’s attempts to say something

profound to God (and to the people around me!), I actually rested from all of that and *prayed*. Instead of listening to someone else's interpretation or application of Scripture, I heard Scripture read without comment and listened for what God was saying to me in the context of our relationship. Instead of having to endure an exhausting round of overly-stimulating programming, this small group of us settled into a silence that was so rich and satisfying that I lost all track of time until someone finally nudged me to remind me that it was my turn to read Scripture!

That was ten years ago and perhaps you have already guessed that that little group of like-minded souls became the Transforming Center and the Transforming Center has been praying that way ever since!²

A Surprising Affinity

This affinity for fixed-hour prayer came as a surprise. Up to this point I had been highly suspicious of what those in my evangelical tradition would have called “rote prayers”—written prayers that we all feared would foster the vain repetitions that Jesus warned about. I was convinced that spontaneous prayers were the only real prayers because they came from the heart; only people who weren't very spiritual and didn't have much to say to God needed to rely on prayers that were written by someone else! Or so I thought. But I have discovered that there *is* another option: to pray the great prayers of the Church and to really mean them!

Many Protestant traditions departed from fixed hour prayer in “protest” of the excesses of Roman Catholic Church and the spiritual numbness that the reformers were trying to distance themselves from. But it turns out that in distancing ourselves, we actually lost a rich avenue of prayer that is rooted in Scripture and in our very own

tradition. Various called “fixed hour prayer”, the “daily office”, or “the Divine hours”, these prayers are deeply Biblical. They express great spiritual truth and deep human longing in stirring language that has the potential to shape the soul. The Psalms, the Old and New Testament prayers (called Canticles), and the Lord’s Prayer all express the universal human experience of the soul reaching out to God. There is no better way to *learn* to pray and to actually pray!

The Gift of Fixed Hour Prayer

Fixed hour prayer has now become one of the richest aspects of my spiritual life, particularly my life in community. While I am not suggesting that we do away with spontaneous prayers—a very important aspect of the spiritual life—there are powerful benefits to fixed-hour prayer as well. For one thing, it relieves us of the need to figure out what to say, which can be completely exhausting at times. It seems that the farther along one gets in the spiritual life the harder it is to articulate the longings that roil beneath the surface of our lives, the intimacies of our life with God, the questions and disillusionments that leave us speechless. When our own words fail us, the well-chosen words of Scripture or the prayers from the old prayer books help us to express the inexpressible in ways that are deeply satisfying and open us to an encounter with God. During moments when we might not even know how to approach God, fixed hour prayer shows us the way.

Fixed hour prayer also gives us a way to anchor our daily lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without orienting or reorienting ourselves to the presence of God in our lives. “Living within the sweet caresses of the hours of prayer,” Scot McKnight observes, “is the

simplest and easiest way to consecrate our entire day as service to God.”³ Praying at least some of the fixed hours in community can anchor and shape our identity as individuals and as communities of believers.

Practice

Spend time this week paying attention to your experience of prayer these days. In what part of the day do you feel most distant or dis-oriented from the presence of God? When is it hardest to know how to approach God or how to experience all of life as a prayer? Morning, Mid-day, Evening, Night? What is it about that part of the day that makes prayer seem so difficult?

For this week, let it be enough just to notice the part of your day where prayer seems difficult, impossible or even irrelevant. Notice it, talk to God about this, journal about it; perhaps even begin to acknowledge your need for God in that part of the day and what it might be like find a way to pray in that place.

Part II of this article will elaborate on four of the fixed hours of prayer and how praying these hours can help us to orient ourselves to God amid the unique challenges and opportunities that each part of the day represents.

¹ Elise S. Eslinger, ed., *Upper Room Worshipbook* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1985), 114.

² I am indebted to Joe Sherman, for his guidance in developing the liturgies we use in the Transforming Center.

³ Scott McKnight, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, and Today* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), p. 239.

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