

An Interview with Brian G. Najapfour about his co-edited book *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

By Chadd Sheffield

A Brief Biography of Brian G. Najapfour

Born and reared in the Philippines, Brian G. Najapfour holds a Th.M. in Historical Theology from Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS), Grand Rapids, Michigan. From 2001 until his coming to PRTS in 2006, Najapfour served as a pastor-teacher in the Philippines. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Biblical Spirituality under Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He is married to Sarah J. Najapfour.

1. How has your prayer life grown since writing/editing this book and fleshing out all of the doctrines taught by these reformers and puritans?

Before answering your question, allow me to first express my heart-felt gratitude for this privilege of being interviewed by you. By God's grace, since I started this project, I have noticed a growth in my prayer life. However, I realize that the more I study the subject of prayer, the more I see my own prayerlessness. And the more I see my prayerlessness, the more I realize my great need of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

Indeed, my study of the subject has made me more aware of two basic truths: first, because of my indwelling sin, my soul acts unfriendly toward prayer; and second, because of my indwelling sin, I need the Holy Spirit's assistance. For me to be able to pray, therefore, I have to constantly remind my soul that prayer is not a foe but a friend. Prayer is such a difficult work that it requires strong discipline. Martin Luther (1483-1546) is not exaggerating when he declares, prayer is "the hardest work of all" (p. 9). I am not embarrassed to admit that sometimes I find it more enjoyable to play basketball than to pray to God. Sometimes prayer becomes boring to me. Writing in his treatise *I Will Pray with the Spirit* (1662), John Bunyan (1628-1688) understands what I mean here when he says:

May I but speak my own experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of praying to God as I ought; it is enough to make you poor, blind, carnal men, to entertain strange thoughts of me. For, as for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so loath to go to God, and when it is with him, so loath to stay with him, that many times I am forced in my prayers; *first* to beg of God that he would take mine heart, and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there (Psalm 86:11). Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am

so blind, nor how to pray, I am so ignorant; only (blessed be grace) the *Spirit helps our infirmities* [Rom. 8:26] (cited in p. 116).

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin, commenting on this quote, notes, “From personal experience, Bunyan well knew the allergic reaction of the old nature to the presence of God. So were it not for the Spirit, none would be able to persevere in prayer” (p. 117). Since my indwelling sin makes me unfriendly and even ignorant towards the necessity of prayer, I need the assistance of the Spirit. Why? Because in the words of Bunyan, a “man without the help of the Spirit cannot so much as pray once; much less, continue...in a sweet praying frame” (cited in p. 118). O my blessed Holy Spirit give me more grace to pray!

2. What caused you to choose the religious leaders you did? (i.e., not ancient writers like Augustine or modern like Donald S. Whitney)

It was not until I came to Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS), Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2006 that I *really* noticed my own prayerlessness. Coming to this seminary, the first thing I observed was its godly atmosphere. I was particularly impressed by the prayerful life of its staff. I remember one day after hearing Dr. Joel R. Beeke pray, I felt I had not prayed before, and I also became curious about his prayer life. I, of course, found out that the Reformers and the Puritans had greatly influenced this man’s prayer life. I then began to investigate the teachings of these Reformers and Puritans on prayer with a desire to learn more how to pray. In fact, most of the papers I wrote for my Th.M. program were about prayer. The chapters I contributed to the co-edited book were originally papers written for this program. My thesis itself was about prayer—“The Very Heart of Prayer’: Reclaiming John Bunyan’s Spirituality” (2009).

Nevertheless, my interest in Reformed and Puritan perspectives on prayer does not mean that we cannot learn from other writers such as the church fathers, medieval theologians, Evangelicals, and modern authors like Donald S. Whitney. We can also learn from these godly men.

3. Which one of these godly men has influenced your prayers the most?

Allow me to give you two: Martin Luther (one from the Reformers) and John Bunyan (one from the Puritans). These two men have profoundly shaped my spirituality, particularly my prayer life. For example, they taught me to maintain the priority of prayer. Luther once said, “I have so much scheduled for tomorrow I must pray for that I must arise an hour earlier to have an extra hour alone with God” (cited in p. 224). Similarly, Bunyan wrote, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed” (cited in p. 231). How often we do the opposite and only set apart a little time to pray because we are too busy in our work. May we capture the prayer life of Luther who “Even in the busiest periods of the Reformation,” says Andrew W. Kosten,

“averaged two hours of prayer daily” (p. 24). And how true that we accomplish little because we do not pray to God for help. This is basically the point of James: “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). I am more and more convinced that behind the effectiveness of these men in the ministry was their powerful prayer life.

4. When you pray do you always pray "to the Father" in the "name of the Son?"

While I normally offer my prayer to the Father, in the name of Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit, sometimes I address my prayer to the Spirit and sometimes to the Son. Luther said when we pray to Jesus, we “need not worry that the Father and the Holy Spirit will be angry on this account. They know that no matter which Person [we] call upon, [we] call upon all three Persons and upon the One God at the same time. For [we] cannot call upon one Person without calling upon the others, because the one, undivided divine Essence exists in all and in each Person.” John Owen (1616-1683) in his treatise *Communion with God* (1657) encouraged us to fellowship with each person of the triune God. Our prayer should be trinitarian. In our prayer, we can say with Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) “I don't know which Person of the Trinity I love the most, but this I know, I love each of them, and I need them all.”

5. I noticed that the overwhelming theme throughout the book was argumentations on how to pray and the immense blessings prayer brings without focusing on the spiritual consequences of a weak prayer life. Was this intentional, and if so why?

You bring up a very good observation here. Dr. Joel Beeke and I, along with other contributors, probably gave little attention to what the sin of prayerlessness can do to our Christian life. Dr. Beeke was, of course, aware of this. Hence, he included one chapter called “Prayerful Praying Today” where he tackled the issue of prayerlessness and the damage that this sin can do to a believer. In that chapter Dr. Beeke writes, “When our prayer life is boarded up, everything else begins to shut down.... Prayerless praying freezes before reaching heaven, while prayerful praying pierces heaven and warms the soul” (p. 226). We should take the sin of prayerlessness seriously! Dr. Beeke even dares to say, “If you are prayerless in your prayer, you are still dead in your sins. You must cry out to God in repentance, begging Him to make you alive in Christ” (pp. 226-27).

6. When you began the book, did you immediately know which Reformers/Puritans you would write about?

Yes, when I contributed two chapters to the book, I did know on which Reformers I would focus. As I said earlier, my contributed chapters were originally written as part of my requirements for the Th.M. program.

7. Throughout the book it is mentioned or often mentioned that Christians would get up early in order to pray. Could you elaborate on the schedule Christians should keep concerning going to bed early in order to get up early?

I feel unqualified to answer this question. I confess that I am not for example like Joseph Alleine (1634-1668) who would wake up very early in the morning to pray. Let me quote here what his wife said of him:

At the time of his health, he did rise constantly at or before four of the clock, and on the Sabbath sooner, if he did wake. He would be much troubled if he heard smiths, or shoemakers, or such tradesmen, at work at their trades before he was in his duties with God; saying to me often, "O how this noise shames me! Doth not my Master deserve more than theirs?" From four till eight he spent in prayer, holy contemplation, and singing of psalms, which he much delighted in, and did daily practice alone, as well as in his family (cited in p. 225).

I do not rise up that early to do my devotion, nor do I spend four hours straight in prayer a day. I admit that this is one area in my life that I need to improve. I need to discipline myself to be able to spend more time with God and sing with William Walford (1772-1850) "Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!" I know it will take grace and self-control for me to break the pattern that I have been used to. O may the Lord help me grow more in my prayer life!

However, going to bed late and waking up late does not mean that we cannot have quality time to pray. Each of us knows which time works best for us. For Alleine, 4 o'clock in the morning worked best for him, but this time may be too early for others. So, I would say that we should know when we can best have quality time with God. Also, we need to remember that to be prayerful does not necessarily mean spending four hours straight in prayer a day, or spending seven hours a day, as in the case of John Welsh (1568-1622), pious son-in-law of John Knox (1483-1546). If we try to imitate these men, we will be disappointed. Why? Because we are simply not like them. But, I am not suggesting that we should be content with where we are right now insofar as our prayer life is concerned. We must always strive to grow more and more in our prayers. Actually, we co-edited this book to encourage and at the same time to challenge us to take our own prayer life to a higher level.

8. Was there any event in your life, in particular, that goaded you into writing this book or that gave you a sense that a book like this is needed in our day?

Like what I mentioned earlier, after hearing Dr. Joel Beeke pray, I felt I had never prayed before. This led me to become curious about his prayer life. I found out that the Reformers and the Puritans had tremendously impacted his prayer life. So, I started studying the teaching of these Reformers and Puritans on prayer with a desire to go deeper into my own communion with God. Actually, my original plan was to publish a book on prayer in the Philippines. What I was planning to do was publish all the papers I wrote on prayer for the Th.M. program. In addition to these papers, I was going to ask permission from Dr. Beeke to include his article on Calvin on prayer. When Dr. Beeke learned about my plan, he asked me if I was going to publish them in my language. I said, no. I intended to publish them in English. Dr. Beeke then said why not publish them here in the U.S. I obviously did not hesitate to take Dr. Beeke's suggestion. The book grew with the contributions of Dr. J. Stephen Yuille, Dr. Haykin, Rev. Johnny C. Serafini (who did his M.Div. thesis on prayer) and Dr. Peter Beck (who wrote his dissertation on Jonathan Edwards's theology of prayer). Again, it was my personal desire to learn to pray more that motivated me to co-edit a book like this.

9. What modern men have influenced your prayer life?

Without a shadow of doubt, Dr. Joel Beeke has been one. My dear friend Kushal Rai, whom I first met at PRTS in 2008, has also had an impact on my prayer life. Rai, who hailed from India, came to PRTS for his Th.M. degree. He is now back in his native land faithfully serving the Lord. Rai is one of the few godly young men that I have ever known. I am often jealous of the piety of this man. When he prays, his personal holiness vibrates in his prayer. Indeed, he has modeled to me a godly prayer life. O may the Lord raise more godly men and women like Beeke and Rai!

Soli Deo Gloria!