

Concentrated Prayer for Wandering Minds

Brother Longprayers stands to pray near me in a prayer meeting. “Gracious heavenly Father,” he begins. “We thank You that You are sovereign over all. And Your Word invites us to ‘approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace.’” [Heb. 4:16].



Yes, Lord, my heart agrees. That man sure is articulate in his prayers. My mind takes a detour. And he must have memorized a lot of Scripture to use it so much when he prays. “You are the Great Physician, and we ask you to heal Sister Surgerybound and provide for her financially,” he continues.

I wonder if I paid my American Express bill yet. It’s due tomorrow.

Brother Longprayers’ voice rises, and my brain reengages. “Father, You are omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. You know what she’s going through, nothing is too difficult for You, and we know You are with her right now.” Hmm. My new friend Diana didn’t show up tonight. I wonder if she’s OK. She said she was coming.

A few minutes later, Sister Notsoeloquent begins, “God, bless all them missionaries around the world that our church supports.”

I cringe at her bad grammar, and my Bible falls off my lap. I reach down to pick it up and notice I’m wearing one navy shoe and one black shoe. How did I put on mismatched shoes? What are people going to think?

And on it goes. I start thinking, It's my turn to pray next. I wonder how I can express that prayer request just right.

Focusing Our Minds

The above scenario may be an exaggeration. But perhaps not by much. I don't know anyone who doesn't get distracted during corporate prayer. Our minds wander. And the detours often take us places we don't want to go.

My heart resonates with David when he prays, "Hear my cry, O God; Attend to my prayer" (Ps. 61:1, nkjv). Not just "listen to," as the NIV renders it. But "pay attention to."

And in the same way that I want God to "attend to" me, I also want to "attend to" the prayer requests others have voiced. I want so much to engage and attend (be in attendance, be all there, pay attention) to what others are praying—petitions and praises.

So how do we "attend to" others' prayers? I've found a simple little mind trick to help me stay focused during corporate prayer—in small groups or large, in a worship service, or even during the before-dinner prayers of Grandpa Godly, who prays so long the food gets cold.

We can simply imagine the person leading in prayer saying, "Repeat after me. . . ."

So when the local Brother Longprayers begins with "Gracious heavenly Father," we can repeat, and pray within our heart, that phrase, Gracious heavenly Father. When he begins quoting Scripture, we can repeat it after him, phrase by phrase: approach God's throne of grace . . . with confidence . . . so that we may receive mercy . . . and find grace. And when he prays for healing and provision, we can repeat in our minds, We ask you to heal Sister Surgerybound . . . and provide for her financially.

Then when Sister Notsoeloquent uses bad grammar, we can paraphrase, the way we would say it. When she prays more generally for all the missionaries, we can pray for one we know personally or one whose ministry particularly touches our heart: Father, I pray that You will open the heart of the resistant college student Brother Tenderheart wrote to us about.

When our mind wanders in a good direction—such as praying in specifics for a generalized prayer—we can catch up, when we're ready, with whoever is leading in prayer.

I want my heart to beat in sync with the people I'm joining in prayer. So when I find my mind wandering and I want to "be in attendance" and "be all there," I follow this simple approach: Repeat after me.

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Note: Joyce Ellis and this article won First Place at the recent Evangelical Press Association Convention Freelance Article category. Congratulations Joyce. Here she is receiving her award.

