

Learning to Pray

BY STEVEN R. HARMON

The Christ who responds to the plea “Lord, teach us to pray” still helps Christians learn to pray through his body, the Church, in its historical experience of learning the practice of prayer. We have much to learn, then, from the fathers and mothers of the early Church as they learned this practice.

As the central practice of the Christian life, prayer is prominent throughout the early history of Christianity. One of the first symbols employed in Christian art is the *orant* (from the Latin *orans*, “one who prays”), a woman standing with her arms outstretched in a cruciform posture of prayer. Prayer is perhaps the most common theme in “patristic” literature, the writings of the fathers and mothers of the Church in the four centuries after the New Testament. Almost all writings from this era include some expression of prayer, and liturgical texts preserve many prayers that were voiced by clergy and congregations in early worship services. Several of the most prominent theologians wrote significant treatises on prayer – notably Tertullian (late second/early third century), Origen (c. 185-c. 251), Cyprian (d. 258), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335- c. 395), and Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399).¹

When the monk replaced the martyr as the ideal embodiment of the Christian life following the end of persecution early in the fourth century, the work of prayer was seen as essential to the monastic vocation. That made prayer essential to the life of every Christian, who was called to deny self and follow Jesus, whether celibate or married, whether withdrawn to the cloister or working in the city. Prayer was so inseparable from all aspects of the life of the Church that a history of the patristic era could easily be written from the standpoint of the history of early Christian prayer.

The Christ who responds to the plea “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1) still helps Christians learn to pray through his body, the Church, in its historical experience of learning the practice of prayer. We have much to learn, then, from the fathers and mothers of the Church as they learned this practice.

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

From the beginning, Christians have learned to pray by going to church.² Every act of worship is a form of prayer, but spoken prayers addressed to God by the gathered congregation play a special role in narrating the story of God in worship – and Christian worship in its essence is the participatory rehearsal of the biblical story of the Triune God. Robert Wilken observes that in patristic worship, prayer had “a distinct narrative function,” for “to praise God is to narrate what he has done.”³ Such prayers were not merely recollections of God’s past actions, however. They made salvation-history present, so that “the past becomes a present presence that opens a new future.”⁴ In prayers of adoration and thanksgiving, worshipers offered themselves to God to become participants in God’s story, so that in prayer God’s story and the worshipers’ stories became intertwined.

The “collect” form of prayer that originated in patristic worship formed worshipers in these narrative dimensions of prayer. In the Latin liturgy around the time of Pope Leo I (440-461), the *collectio* was a prayer voiced by a leader of worship on behalf of the congregation that had the function of collecting together the prayers of the people. Patristic collects included the following elements: “(1) an address to God; (2) a relative or participial clause referring to some attribute or saving act of God; (3) the petition; (4) the purpose for which we ask; (5) the conclusion,” with the second and fourth elements sometimes omitted.⁵ The conclusion was either Christological (“through Jesus Christ our Lord”) or Trinitarian (“through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever”). A collect from the late patristic/early medieval Gallican liturgy exemplifies these elements:

O God the Trinity, Whose Name is ineffable, Who purifiest the cavern of man’s heart from vices, and makest it whiter than the snow; bestow on us Thy compassions; renew in our inward parts, we pray Thee, Thy Holy Spirit, by Whom we may be able to show forth Thy praise; that being strengthened by the righteous and princely Spirit, we may attain a place in the heavenly Jerusalem; through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁶

The address and subsequent relative or participial clauses in patristic collects served to rehearse the story of what God has done or to develop the character of the Triune God as the main figure in the story through declarations of the attributes of the God to whom worshipers offered prayer. The

petitions and the naming of the purposes of the petitions made explicit the worshipers' connections to this divine story and expressed their desire that they and their world might move toward God's goals for the transformation of the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God.

These theological functions of prayer in the worship of the Church were also operative in another practice of even earlier patristic origin, the corporate praying of the Lord's Prayer. In this prayer, divine and human participation in the story are framed by the vision of the reign of God as already a present reality but not yet fully realized "on earth as it is in heaven."

The "we" and "our" first-person plural language in both the collect form and the Lord's Prayer underscore the communal motif in the divine story, helping to prevent the rehearsal of this story from degenerating into a tale about the individual's relationship with God, as sometimes happens when leaders of public prayer use "I" and "me" first-person singular language today. For ancient Christians, corporate worship was not simply a gathering of people who engaged in their individual devotions in close proximity to one another. The practice of voiced first-person plural communal prayers reminded the worshiper that as a new creation in Christ, she was fundamentally an ecclesial person for whom "we" and "our" took precedence over "I" and "my."

THE CHURCH'S EARLIEST PRAYERS

Long before Christians developed set forms of prayer such as the collect, but continuing long after they began praying such prayers, they learned to pray from the prayer book they inherited from the synagogue, the Psalter. In the New Testament there are more references to the Psalms than to any other book of the Old Testament, and Jesus himself modeled the practice of identifying with the ancient people of God by praying Israel's prayers from the Psalter. Singing the psalms was a central feature of worship in the Jewish synagogues, and even after the parting of the ways between the church and the synagogue, early Christians continued this practice in Sunday worship and in the services of the daily office that developed within monastic circles.

Christians throughout history have found prayer to be difficult. The ancient Christians who embraced the Psalter as their prayer book found help with their difficulties in prayer, first and foremost because the psalms supplied words to pray when the mind of the worshiper could not. The psalms also helped worshipers confront the difficulties of prayer that stem from a misunderstanding of the nature of prayer and of the nature of the God to whom Christians pray. It is possible to become so focused on the proper way to pray – the right words, the right patterns, or the right frame of mind – that one's praying is paralyzed. Praying the psalms offered a remedy for this paralysis by modeling prayer as utter honesty with God and by portraying God as the sort of God who readily hears honest prayer.

Christians who prayed Psalm 139, for example, could learn that they can be honest with God precisely because of who God is.⁷ As church historian Everett Ferguson observed, “The nature of God and faith in him formed the basis of Christian prayer,”⁸ and Psalm 139 illustrates well what early Christians were able to learn about the nature of God when they prayed the Psalms. Verses 1-18 of Psalm 139 portray God as a close, constant companion. Those verses are divided into three sections of six verses each, and a theologian cannot help but notice that these three six-verse sections closely correspond to three of the classical attributes of God: *omniscience*, *omnipresence*, and *omnipotence*. Those words belong to the shared foreign language of theologians, divinity students, and ministers; this is what they mean when they use them. To say that God is *omniscient* is to say that God knows everything. To say that God is *omnipresent* is to say that God is present everywhere. To say that God is *omnipotent* is to say that God is all-powerful, able to do all things. Christian teachers and preachers have used that language frequently enough that most church members have some familiarity with it. But when we talk about God in that fashion, we sometimes make God sound so distant, so far beyond the world of human experience, that we find ourselves unable to relate to this God. Indeed, such language can run the risk of describing the God of the philosophers rather than the God of the biblical story. Psalm 139 characterizes God in a manner that calls to mind the classical attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, but the psalmist invokes those attributes of God in the context of an intimately personal relationship with humanity.

Verses 1-6 portray God as *omniscient*—God knows everything. Specifically, God knows everything about *us*. God has scrutinized us, and the result is that God knows us. The verb for *knowing* in verse 1 is the same verb used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible for the most intimate act of love between a husband and a wife.⁹ That is how intimately God knows humanity. God knows the

most mundane details of our daily lives, including when we sit down, when we stand up, when we lie down, and where we go during the day. God is completely above and beyond the physical world, yet God knows every one of our thoughts. God knows what is going on in our minds, even before we are able to put it into words. The God who knows us intimately knows everything about us.

The practice of voiced first-person plural communal prayers reminded the ancient worshiper that as a new creation in Christ, she was fundamentally an ecclesial person for whom “we” and “our” took precedence over “I” and “my.”

God is not only omniscient, but also *omnipresent*—God is everywhere. According to verses 7-12, there is nowhere one can go where God is not present. The ancient Hebrew poets often emphasized an idea by saying the same thing twice with different words or images—the literary device of synonymous parallelism.¹⁰ The psalmist employs this device in verse 7. The second half verse, “Where can I go from your spirit?” means the same thing

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as the second half, “Where can I go from your presence?” God’s Spirit is thus equivalent to God’s personal presence. No matter how far the psalmist goes, the psalmist cannot get away from God’s presence, from God’s Holy Spirit. God is as high as heaven and as low as Sheol, the realm of the dead in the theology of the Old Testament. God inhabits

every place from horizon to horizon, from sea to sea. Even the darkness that hides human actions from other people is no cover from God’s light. It is impossible to escape God’s presence, for God is always present wherever we are. To affirm the omnipresence of God is to declare the personal presence of God with humanity.

God is also *omnipotent*—God is all-powerful, able to do anything. Verses 13-18 sing of God’s all-powerfulness in personally creating each human being. God personally performed the miracle that is a human life. Even before a baby is born, God is at work in her mother’s womb putting together that amazingly complex combination of cells and nerves and bones and organs that makes her live. If this all-powerful God has personally created each one of us and made us the unique persons that we are, is it any wonder that God knows everything about us, that God is able to be always with us? God is not omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent merely in the abstract; God is all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful in particular in the context of a personal relationship with us. This is how the early Christian interpreters read Psalm 139 and its portrayal of God, from Clement of Rome at the end of the first century to Fulgentius of Ruspe in the sixth century.¹¹

It is because God knows everything about us, because God is always with us, and because God is all-powerful in working in our lives that we can be completely honest with God in prayer. These truths about God’s nature have the potential to motivate Christians toward utter honesty with God in two ways. First, knowing that God knows us completely should keep us from playing charades with God. God knows what is going on in our lives, so it is pointless to be anything but completely honest with God. Second,

knowing that God knows us completely should give us the courage to speak our mind with God. Nothing we can say or think in the context of prayer can shock God – God has heard it all before, and God knows we are thinking it anyway.

That leads to the question of *how* to be honest with God. The answer, simply, is to be completely frank. That is what the psalmist does in verses 19-22. He says things to God in prayer that ought to be shocking to anyone with a moral conscience. He prays for God to kill the wicked. He expresses his hate for these people not once but four times: he hates them, he loathes them, he hates them with perfect hatred, he counts them his enemies. Surely these are not appropriate things for a Christian to pray, are they? Actually this is just the tip of the iceberg in the Psalms in terms of raw, uncensored honesty. Certain psalms are known as “imprecatory psalms,” psalms that pronounce a curse on the enemies of the psalmist and the enemies of God. One such imprecatory psalm is Psalm 137:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back
 what you have done to us!
 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
 and dash them against the rock!

Psalm 137:8-9

Are Christians supposed to pray like that? Yes and no. No, in the sense that it is not right for us to cherish hatred in our hearts. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that inner hatred is just as serious in the eyes of God as the external expression of that hatred in murder (Matthew 5:21-26). But when we *are* angry at somebody, when we are so upset at someone that we come to hate them, we need to be honest with God about that. We ought to feel free to tell God exactly how we feel. No need to dress it up or sanitize it – we can say whatever pops into our minds to the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God known by Israel and the Church, God’s people.

Psalm 139 also points toward a transformation of the one who prays such honest prayers. The psalmist’s words in verses 19-22 are haughty and self-righteous. He focuses on the splinters in everybody else’s eyes, all the while oblivious to the log in his own. But by verse 23 his attitude starts to change. He has complained to God about the wicked and bloodthirsty who speak maliciously of God and oppose God. Now the question occurs to him: Am I like that? Could it be that I too have been God’s enemy in my thoughts and words and deeds? His pride turns to humility, and he prays, “Search *me*, O God, and know *my* heart; test *me*, and know *my* thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in *me*, and lead *me* in the way everlasting.”

THE BLIND SPOTS OF ANCIENT CHRISTIAN PRAYER

The Christian whose spirituality was steeped in the Psalter could not have avoided learning to be as utterly honest in prayer as were the psalm-

ists who authored the imprecatory psalms. Unlike many lectionaries in use today, the early lectionaries that appointed specific psalms for singing on particular Sundays of the Christian year did not censor the imprecatory psalms or their most morally offensive pleas. Yet when the early church fathers preached homilies and wrote commentaries on these psalms (Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139), they tended to shrink back from endorsing such brutal honesty. Their clear sense seemed unbecoming for the people of God, so the fathers found in them other meanings. Origen, for example, wrote this about Psalm 137 and its wish that the children of Babylon might be dashed against rocks:

And in this also the just give up to destruction all their enemies, which are their vices, so that they do not spare even the children, that is, the early beginnings and promptings of evil.... For “the little ones” of Babylon (which signifies confusion) are those troublesome sinful thoughts that arise in the soul, and one who subdues them by striking, as it were, their heads against the firm and solid strength of reason and truth, is the person who “dashes the little ones against the stones”; and he is therefore truly blessed.¹²

Despite the Psalm-steeped spiritual formation of ancient Christians, such allegorizing of its plain sense led some of them to miss one of the most important lessons of learning to pray from the Psalter—that we pray most freely when we are utterly honest with the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God.

The early fathers and mothers of the Church learned imperfectly to pray from the Psalter, and so do we, to the extent that we shrink back from praying these psalms boldly in their plain sense and fail to emulate their example of honest prayer when we pray in our own words. We too are guilty of what Brian Walsh calls “our censoring of lament, our covering-up of impolite piety.”¹³ These failures are proof that we need help beyond the resources of our own minds when we pray. When Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray,” he answered by providing a set prayer. Christians have always been free to apply the principles of that prayer to their own heartfelt extemporaneous prayers, but they have also found the experience of praying the Lord’s Prayer in solidarity with the Church in all times and places profoundly meaningful. Christ’s body, the Church, still teaches us to pray by inviting us to pray with the Church the Church’s prayers—the Lord’s Prayer, collects ancient and modern, the Psalms, and other prayers that provide words for our prayers from beyond ourselves that transform us when we pray them.

NOTES

1 Tertullian, *On Prayer*, translated by S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 3:681-691; Origen, *Prayer; Exhortation to Martyrdom*, *Ancient Christian Writers*, 19,

translated by John J. O'Meara (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1954); Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer*, translated by Ernest Wallis, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:447-457; Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer; The Beatitudes*, *Ancient Christian Writers*, 18, translated by Hilda C. Graef (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1954); Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos; Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1972).

2 Portions of this section are adapted from Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, 27 (Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2006), 165-168.

3 Robert L. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 32-33.

4 *Ibid.*, 35.

5 Peter G. Cobb, "The Liturgy of the Word in the Early Church," in *The Study of Liturgy*, revised edition, edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, and Paul Bradshaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 224-225.

6 William Bright, *Ancient Collects and Other Prayers*, seventh edition (Oxford, U.K.: James Parker, 1902), 37.

7 Portions of this section are adapted from Steven R. Harmon, "Theology Proper and the Proper Way to Pray: An Exposition of Psalm 139," *Review and Expositor*, 104.4 (Fall 2007): 777-786.

8 Everett Ferguson, "Prayer," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, edited by Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

9 G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, translated by David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), s.v. "ydh," 5:448-481.

10 See Daniel S. Mynatt, "The Poetry and Literature of the Psalms," in *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate*, edited by H. Wayne Ballard, Jr. and W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 56-59.

11 Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, ed., *Psalms 51-150*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 382-387.

12 Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.22, quoted in Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51-150*, 379-380.

13 Brian J. Walsh, "Wake Up Dead Man: Singing the Psalms of Lament," in *Get Up Off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog*, edited by Raewynne J. Whiteley and Beth Maynard (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003), 38.



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