

Prayer

Christian Reflection
A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY

GENERAL EDITOR Robert B. Kruschwitz
ART EDITOR Heidi J. Hornik
REVIEW EDITOR Norman Wirzba
PROCLAMATION EDITOR William D. Shiell

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Haley Stewart
DESIGNER Eric Yarbrough

PUBLISHER The Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361

PHONE (254) 710-3774
TOLL-FREE (USA) (866) 298-2325
WEB SITE www.ChristianEthics.ws
E-MAIL Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

All Scripture is used by permission, all rights reserved, and unless otherwise indicated is from *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

ISSN 1535-8585

Christian Reflection is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$3.00 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the Web site.

Christian Reflection is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

The Center expresses its thanks to individuals, churches, and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who provided financial support for this publication.

© 2009 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University
All rights reserved

Contents

Introduction	8
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Pray without Ceasing	11
Paul J. Griffiths	
Learning to Pray	18
Steven R. Harmon	
Not about Me	26
Merold Westphal	
Sweet Hours of Prayer	36
Ruth Haley Barton	
Praying for a Change	43
Todd Edmondson	
When Gathered Saints in Common Praise	51
Burt L. Burleson and Kurt Kaiser	
Worship Service	54
Burt L. Burleson	
Our Deepest Prayer	59
Terry W. York	
Waiting Here, In Silence	64
Terry W. York and Kurt Kaiser	
Christian Prayer in Art	66
Heidi J. Hornik	
<i>The Angelus</i>	
Jean-François Millet	
<i>Allegory of Transfiguration (detail of Saint Apollinaris)</i>	
Mosaic Apse in San Apollinare, Classe, Italy	

continued

Retreat: A Time to Listen to the Groans	70
Trevor Hudson	
Prayer in Eclipse	76
Ken Massey	
Prayerful Intimacy	80
D. Leslie Hollon	
Lord, Teach Us to Pray	84
John Essick	
Exploring the Forms of Prayer	89
Bruce Ellis Benson	
Editors	94
Contributors	96

**Thoughtful Christian reflection
and reliable guidance
in engaging the ethical dimensions
of today's world.**

**PROPHETIC ETHICS ♦ PRAYER
CONSUMERISM ♦ PARABLES
MARRIAGE ♦ CHILDREN ♦ AGING
THE PORNOGRAPHIC CULTURE
CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM
FORGIVENESS ♦ SUFFERING
CLONING ♦ HEAVEN AND HELL
MYSTICISM ♦ CITIES AND TOWNS
MORAL LANDSCAPE OF CREATION
SABBATH ♦ PEACE AND WAR
INKLINGS OF GLORY ♦ HEALTH
FOOD AND HUNGER ♦ VOCATION
SINGING OUR LIVES ♦ CATECHISM
GLOBAL WEALTH ♦ HOSPITALITY
SERMON ON THE MOUNT ♦ SPORTS
FRIENDSHIP ♦ IMMIGRATION
WHERE WISDOM IS FOUND ♦ PRAYER
SCHOOLS IN A PLURALIST CULTURE**

**WOMEN AND THE CHURCH
APOCALYPTIC VISION
RACISM
MONASTICISM OLD AND NEW**

Christian Reflection

Order your free subscription today.

Christian Reflection is an ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are available for group study at \$3.00 per copy. Study guides and lesson plans are available free on the Web site.

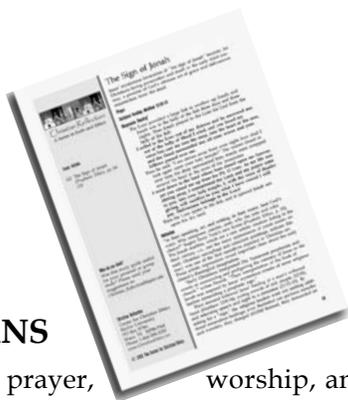
www.ChristianEthics.ws
phone (toll-free): 1-866-298-2325



www.ChristianEthics.ws

STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Prayer* issue.



PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING

Why are we so deeply challenged by the Apostle Paul's instruction to make every aspect of our lives a prayer? We tend to think of praying as occasionally talking to God. But clearly the Apostle has a different idea about the nature of prayer than the one we ordinarily have.

LEARNING TO PRAY

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.

NOT ABOUT ME

Perhaps a burning preoccupation with oneself can coexist with our prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession, even as it contaminates and domesticates them. But the prayer of praise requires a deep decentering of the self.

PRAYING FOR A CHANGE

Do petitionary and intercessory prayers bring about real change? We may not openly doubt their efficacy, but the adage "prayer doesn't change things, it changes us" has become an easy escape to explain away mind-bending puzzles about prayer and to reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

SWEET HOURS OF PRAYER

Fixed-hour prayer anchors our lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without reorienting ourselves to the presence of God. Praying at least some of the fixed-hours with others can shape our identity as communities of believers.

OUR DEEPEST PRAYER

We often fill our worship time – personal and corporate – to the brim with talking, singing, reading, and reflecting. There is too little prayerful waiting in silence, when we can hear our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God's waiting.

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The practice of prayer is central to discipleship. It opens us to God's gracious activity in our lives and forms us in Christ-like ways of perceiving, caring for, and acting in the world.

Prayer is essential to “the call to holiness at the heart of the Christian gospel,” Don Saliers has reminded us. Indeed, it “constitutes the focal point of Christian existence: Christ’s own life is one of active prayer and prayerful action. It is thus fitting to speak of his whole life as a prayer—a continual self-offering in love and obedience to the Father.” Our contributors explore how the practice of prayer opens us to God’s gracious activity in our lives and forms us in Christ-like ways of perceiving, caring for, and acting in the world.

We are deeply challenged by the Apostle Paul’s instruction to make every aspect of our lives a prayer, Paul Griffiths writes in *Pray without Ceasing* (p. 11), because “clearly a different idea about the nature of prayer is in play here than the one we ordinarily have.” We tend to think of praying as occasionally talking to God. But in Scripture and for most of the Christian tradition, this is an impoverished view of prayer. “It is not wrong,” he notes, “it is just inadequate.” Griffiths suggests that constant prayer is a grateful attitude toward God that becomes, through practice, “a second skin.”

Because prayer is so central to discipleship, learning how to pray became the most common theme in Christian writings in the four centuries after the New Testament. Steven Harmon thinks we can learn much about prayer, and about the God to whom we pray, from the “collect” form of prayer that originated in early Christian worship and the practice of singing the Psalter. These ancient forms of prayer, Harmon writes in *Learning to Pray* (p. 18), “provide words for our prayers from beyond ourselves that transform us when we pray them.”

In *Sweet Hours of Prayer* (p. 36) Ruth Haley Barton commends another ancient Christian practice of praying at fixed hours each day, often called the “daily office” or the “divine hours.” “Fixed-hour prayer anchors our daily lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without reorienting ourselves to the presence of God,” she writes. Furthermore, by praying in concert with other believers, we connect with the great “communion of saints” and express “that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions—and that is no small thing.”

“Prayer is a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling...that burning preoccupation with myself,” Merold Westphal suggests in *Not about Me* (p. 26). Admittedly, in a selfish, distorted way we might give thanks, confess sins, petition for help, and even intercede for friends. But prayers of praise to God will lead us to “abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined,” he concludes. “To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying. To mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift.”

“Prayer changes things,” the well-known saying goes, but many of us remain skeptical. We have trouble believing that prayers of petition and intercession affect anything except, perhaps, the hearts of those who pray. In *Praying for a Change* (p. 43), Todd Edmondson probes the hard questions about how prayer can affect God and change the world, even as it transforms us. “To embrace prayer as a force for change,” he writes, “we must stop thinking of it as just a human action” and “re-envision prayer as a relationship involving God, the world God has created, and the Church.”

Heidi Hornik reviews diverse images of Christian prayer in art. In *The Orant* (p. 68), she explores how the traditional cruciform stance with uplifted hands is used to depict Apollinaris as a Christ-like shepherd, praying for the congregation of San Apollinare in Classe, Italy, that he guides and protects. In *A Call to Prayer* (p. 66), Hornik examines the prayerful stance of the peasant couple in Jean-François Millet’s *The Angelus* (on the cover) as they pause from their daily labor to express gratitude for the Incarnation.

The worship service (p. 54) by Burt Burleson, based on themes of prayer in the Book of Hebrews, invites us to participate in a wide range of Christian prayer. His new hymn, “When Gathered Saints in Common Praise” (p. 51), with a tune by Kurt Kaiser, reminds us: “When gathered saints in common praise / their litanies of thanksgiving raise, / the closed and burdened soul is freed / by prayer transcending lesser need.”

Moved by the role of silent waiting within a more contemplative style of corporate worship, Terry York has written a hymn, “Waiting Here, in Silence” (p. 64), with music by Kurt Kaiser. “What a holy place is this place of silence, waiting, and deep prayer,” York says. “Our deepest prayer is our

voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God's waiting."

Three pastors share very personal experiences with prayer. In *Retreat: A Time to Listen to the Groans* (p. 70), Trevor Hudson describes attending to God by praying the Scriptures and listening to the groans of creation, of our own lives, and of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Les Hollon's *Prayerful Intimacy* (p. 80) recounts the role of prayer in giving guidance for a major decision. "My desire for intimacy with God is a common desire," he observes. "Prayer enables us to know more of God and to know that we are known by God." Ken Massey's witness is quite different in *Prayer in Eclipse* (p. 76). Torn by emotional pain over his daughter's tragic illness, he felt abandoned by God and could not pray. "Something has changed for me in the past year, however, which I can only attribute to the prayers of Jesus. Apparently, when I could not pray, Jesus never stopped," he judges. "I no longer have much faith in the 'power of prayer,' but my faith in the power of God is emerging from eclipse."

"It is clear that the Lord's Prayer has always resided at the heart of Christian worship," John Essick observes in *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* (p. 84). As he reviews three books—N. T. Wright's *The Lord & His Prayer*, William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas's *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, and Kenneth W. Stevenson's *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*—that provide complementary approaches to praying and living the Lord's Prayer, Essick reflects on how central for our discipleship is reciting this prayer routinely in personal and corporate worship. "The journey on which this prayer takes us is a dangerous adventure. Our teacher, after all, was crucified for living out its petitions," he concludes. "Praying in the way Jesus taught does not simply make us better people; praying in this way makes us Christian."

"That there are thousands of books on prayer today suggests that we are far from knowing how to do it," Bruce Benson believes. "That we still use the Lord's *model* prayer as our default prayer may indicate, among other things, that we have not moved beyond the basics." In *Exploring the Forms of Prayer* (p. 89), Benson commends four books to help us mature in prayer. Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* shows how to wrestle with the most puzzling questions about prayer. Steven Chase's *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer* and Richard Foster's *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* richly describe various forms of Christian prayer. Thomas Merton's well respected *Contemplative Prayer* invites us to carefully reflect on prayer through the guidance of the Desert Christians of the fourth century. Describing these books collectively as "a rich tapestry" of spiritual guidance, Benson admits that Thomas Merton sums up the situation for all of us when he writes regarding prayer, "we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" The good news is that God welcomes beginners. ✠

Pray without Ceasing

BY PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

The scriptural teaching that we should pray without stopping seems to imply that we should make every aspect of our lives a prayer. But if this is right, then clearly a different idea about the nature of prayer is in play here than the one we ordinarily have.

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul exhorts his hearers, among whom you and I are included, in these words: “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18). It is not merely that he encourages us to act in certain ways—to do good, to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks—no, he wants more, he wants us to do these things “always,” “without ceasing,” “in all circumstances.”

What can this mean? Should you rejoice when the person you love dies horribly before your eyes? Should you pray when you are studying, when you are making love, when you are eating, when you are sleeping? Should you give thanks when you get the news that you have contracted a fatal disease that will kill you painfully within six months?¹ It does not sound immediately sensible to say so, and there is much else in Scripture that recommends what sounds like something rather different, such as weeping when faced with the death of a friend, as Jesus himself did.² So what does Paul mean?

Let’s focus the question by asking specifically about prayer. Paul says that we should do this without ceasing, and he is not alone in saying so. Luke’s introduction to the parable of the unjust judge—or, if you prefer, the persistent widow—says much the same thing: “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always, and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

At the end of the parable, the unjust judge promises to grant justice to the importunate widow, not because he has become just or reconsidered her case, but “so that she may not wear me out by continually coming” (Luke 18:5). We, it seems – we Christians – are meant to be “continually coming” before God, importuning him in prayer at every moment.

The presence in Scripture of the idea that we should pray without stopping has led many of the Church’s theologians and preachers to reflect a good deal on what it might mean to do this. Some of their formulations are striking and elegant. Augustine, for example, in his expository homilies on the Psalter, writes: “Not only do we not sin when we are adoring [God], but when we are not adoring [God] we sin.”³ Adoration (*adoratio/adorare*) is not quite prayer (*oratio/orare*), but they are closely connected: both are intentional actions that bring us before God, turn us toward God’s face. And Augustine’s formulation makes the very strong claim that adoration – and prayer, if that extension is legitimate – not only suffices to exclude sin, but is necessary for that exclusion. This means, if it is right, that whenever you are not praying (adoring), you are, *ipso facto*, sinning. This is an intensification of Paul’s and Luke’s claims, and it makes them if anything even more puzzling. If, for example, I am watching a baseball game, delighted by the beauty of the double play I just saw, am I thereby sinning because I am not praying? Just what can Augustine mean?

The reason why it is so difficult for us, Christians though we be, to understand these hard sayings about prayer and adoration – sayings that seem to imply that prayer and life are coextensive, and that all non-prayerful action is deeply damaged to the point of being sinful – is that we have in mind a series of separations that Paul, Luke, and Augustine would prefer us not to have. We separate life into compartments. There is the work compartment, the personal life compartment, and the religion compartment, to name just three, and the walls that separate them are thickly impervious. If you are an office worker, for instance, you probably find it hard to think of the parties you go to, the shoe stores you shop in, and the hobbies you pursue as having all that much to do with the projects you manage, the clients you assist, and the skills you develop on the job; and, very likely, although you may try to see and make real to yourself the connections between your life of prayer and your work and play, this will likely seem difficult, a matter of effort aimed at connecting two very different things. We have to work hard, conceptually speaking, if we are to see what Paul, Luke, and Augustine might have meant by requiring us to make every aspect of our lives a prayer, and that is because, for us, prayer is defined as an occasional activity, like eating and sleeping: these are things we must do sometimes, but that by definition we cannot do all the time.

Let’s make this point very specific indeed. The claim is, or seems to be, that if you cannot treat the most boring class you have, or your most painful

moments at the dentist, or your most negative emotional moments, as themselves prayers, active adorations of the Triune Lord, then you are, to just the extent that you fail at doing this, sinning. It is not a matter of praying about these things, of bringing them to Jesus in prayer: they are or ought to be themselves prayers. Only if we think of them in this way can it make sense to say what Paul, Luke, and Augustine seem to say. But if this is right, then clearly a different idea about the nature of prayer is in play here than the one we ordinarily have.

For us, prayer is occasional. We speak intentionally to Jesus or Mary or the Holy Spirit or the Father or our favorite saints sometimes, not all the time. We kneel before the Blessed Sacrament—another form of speaking to Jesus—sometimes, not all the time. We get on our knees before bed or offer a blessing at table at the appropriate times of day, and we think of these as moments of prayer and are certainly not doing them all the time. But for the Christian tradition, for the most part, this is an impoverished understanding of prayer. It is not wrong, it is just inadequate.

Suppose we think, instead, of prayer as most fundamentally and centrally the acknowledgment of gift. To acknowledge something as a gift is to know that it came to you, the recipient, from somewhere else, someone other than you: you did not make it, and you do not deserve it, for if you deserve it, it's not really a gift but rather a payment of debt. To treat what you have been given as a gift—to acknowledge it as such and not to pretend that it was really yours all along, or that you made it for yourself, or that it is your due—you have to be grateful, to say thank you (that, incidentally, is what the word “eucharist” most essentially means), and to keep on being grateful. Each time you look at or use the gift, if you are alive and awake and self-aware, you remember with gratitude who gave it to you. That is not so difficult with most gifts: the book on your shelf that your grandmother gave you may easily enough conjure in you gratitude for

For us, prayer is occasional. We speak occasionally to God. But for the Christian tradition, for the most part, this is an impoverished understanding of prayer. It is not wrong, it is just inadequate.

the occasion of its giving whenever you hold it in your hands. But when the gift is life, your very self, all that you have and all that you are—“What do you have that you did not receive?” asks Paul (1 Corinthians 4:7), expecting the answer “nothing whatever”—things are more difficult. The challenge then is to be constantly grateful, habitually aware that whatever good things there are in us or in the world around us are not ours, and, therefore, active

in the way that grateful people are active: enthusiastically, attentively, lovingly, and, above all, not as though we have done anything to deserve the good things that surround us. And that is what it means to pray: to behave as someone gifted, not as we now use that word, to mean someone to be admired for what they can do — “She’s so gifted musically,” we say proudly, meaning, usually, that she, rather than God, should be complimented for what she does — but instead to mean someone who in all she does expresses gratitude to the God who made it possible for her to do anything and for there to be a world in which she can do it.

Prayer is gratitude because gratitude is the primary form of adoration and adoration is, in the end, the only thing that counts because it is the form of human love most appropriate to God. All other loves serve this final love, which is prayer at its highest intensity.

But there are still some puzzles here. Are we to be grateful for suffering, death, sin, agony, and hatred? No. Those are not gifts. They are anti-gifts, loss and lack rather than abundance overspilling. Those we lament. Paul does not mean, as he explains with his characteristic intensity and complexity in the Letter to the Romans, that the damage the world and we ourselves have undergone are subjects for rejoicing or gratitude or love.⁴ No, they are the dark side of giftedness, the damage done to the gift by treating it as something else, as a possession to be wholly owned. Lament, then, is the prayerful response to the gift’s damage as gratitude is to its wholeness. Both are required in a damaged world, and both belong to prayer.

We have now the lineaments of an answer to the question of what it means to pray always: it is to cultivate the habit of gratitude for gift in such a way that being grateful becomes, for us, an attitude that informs all we do. Such an attitude makes a difference, in fact many differences.

First, you do not use a precious gift from your beloved — her picture, taken and framed for you; a lock of her hair, cut and given to you; a letter written to you in her own hand — in the same way that you use the t-shirt handed to you as an unwanted come-on by the credit-card company hoping for your patronage. The former’s particulars are important, and you attend to them as if they were. The latter’s are not, and it will scarcely matter to you what they are. This difference in attentiveness has mostly to do with gratitude: it is because what your beloved gives you is gift in the full sense that you attend to it with passion. And for Christians, everything we have — recall, again, Paul’s dictum that we have nothing we have not been given — is gift in this sense, given by the God who is *interior intimo tuo*, within what is most intimate to yourself, as well as being *superior summo tuo*, above what is highest in you.⁵ Cultivating gratitude, the fundamental attitude of prayer, fosters loving attentiveness to the particulars of your own giftedness, and those of the world in which that giftedness is exercised.

Second, the cultivation of gratitude, whether self-consciously or by habit, makes a difference to our receptiveness to God, which is to say to the

condition of our hearts. Augustine, again, is helpful here. In a letter written to Proba, a wealthy and well-educated Roman widow who had left Rome for North Africa (where Augustine also lived) following the invasion of Rome by Alaric and his Goths in the year 410, he responds to questions about prayer. In response to a difficulty about why the Lord commands us to petition him for particulars when he already knows what we need, he writes:

He [the Lord] knows what we need before we ask him. Why then he does this [that is, requires us to petition him for particulars] can be troubling to the mind unless we understand that the Lord our God does not want our will, of which he cannot be ignorant, to become known to him; rather, he wants our desire to be exercised in our prayers, so that we become able to receive what he is prepared to give.⁶

Roll those concluding phrases around in your mind. Prayer (*oratio*) exercises desire (*desiderium*). It is, we might say, a régime of discipline for desire, a diet for love.⁷ What does prayer do? It makes us capable of something we would not otherwise be capable of, which is reception of the gift, the gift which the Lord is always actively giving us. Without prayer, our hearts are trammled in the direction of ungrateful possessiveness: we grasp what we have as if it were ours, and in doing so try to make of it something it is not and cannot be. The result is that we lose what we think we have, and also ourselves as aspiring owners of it. Recall that we have nothing ungiven, and so the only way to have what we have been given is to receive it as given, as gift. But with prayer, whether the petitions for particulars of which Augustine here writes, or the habitual cultivation of gratitude of which I have been writing, our hearts are opened, increasingly and gradually, to the possibility of receiving the gift, which is, in the end, sanctification.

We have now the lineaments of an answer to the question of what it means to pray always: it is to cultivate the habit of gratitude for gift in such a way that being grateful becomes, for us, an attitude that informs all we do.

Finally, the cultivation of gratitude attenuates fear and brings peace. The risen Lord, after Easter Sunday, constantly reiterates to his disciples when he appears to them that they should not fear and that he brings them peace. The Church's liturgy re-enacts this day-by-day and week-by-week. Our desires, sculpted into gratitude's shape by ceaseless prayer, become

attuned to the fact that the happy or blessed life, the *beata vita*, is in fact being constantly offered to us by the Lord, and that the only thing asked of us is its reception for what it is: prevenient gift. Gratitude of this sort removes deep anxiety. It does not do this immediately, of course, but over time this is the direction in which it tends. If you not only assent to the claim that the Lord wants desperately to give you the blessing of a happy

Explicit address to the Lord, in private or corporate worship, is a moment of filigreed ornament in a deeper and more quotidian process which is identical with the Christian life as a whole.

life, but also, by the cultivation of desire-disciplining gratitude, become the kind of person who acts as if that were true — who responds to the world as if its sufferings and injustices and agonies, though real, are not the last word — then you will also find fear removed and anxiety assuaged. These are not gifts given all in a moment, but they are

delights that become increasingly apparent as the life of prayer deepens and extends itself over the course of a life.

To pray as you work, to make of your work a kind of prayer, is to take it seriously as an exercise in loving gratitude. You don't, if you are a Christian, think of the work you do merely as a means to gather resources to do something else. No, you begin to think of the assignment you have been given to do and the colleagues you have been given to help you do it, as gifts that permit you to show gratitude — not principally gratitude to them, though that should also be present, but to God, who has made it possible for them to work alongside you. The particular tasks you do, the particular clients you help, the particular skills you learn — all these, if you pay close attention to them rather than treating them with the bored indifference of those who wish to get through them as quickly and effortlessly as possible in order to get on with real life, will become, increasingly, windows into God's creation and occasions for joy. Your work is in this sense an opportunity for prayer, and also an opportunity for training in sanctity: for while you might be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, which is to say justified by being washed in his blood, you are not yet sanctified, and your work, whatever it is and however you have been given it, will be among the principal means by which you might become more holy than you are now, a more perfect image of the God who made you, and, therefore, someone who is increasingly transparent to the light of God, increasingly equipped for the eternal praise-shout of gratitude which is, I hope but do not know, your and my final destiny.

I have tried to make sense of the scriptural advocacy of prayer without ceasing by depicting prayer as an attitude of gratitude. That attitude can be cultivated, and then eventually inhabited, like a second skin. Understanding prayer in this way does make it possible to say that prayer can be unceasing. Explicit verbal address to the Lord, then, whether as petition or ejaculation of gratitude, should be understood as an instance of this attitude. Such verbal address has a special importance for Christians, not least because it was prescribed for us by Jesus; but we ought not to understand prayer to be identical with it. Explicit address to the Lord, whether in private or in corporate worship, is a moment of filigreed ornament in a deeper and more quotidian process which is identical with the Christian life as a whole.

NOTES

1 Though it should be noted that, in a passage which makes difficult and painful reading, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), a saint and doctor of the church, welcomes with delight the expectoration of blood that marks the presence of the tuberculosis that would kill her at the age of twenty-four. See *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Thérèse of Lisieux*, third edition, translated by John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 210-211.

2 Jesus weeps at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35).

3 “*Non solum non peccemus adorando, sed peccemus non adorando,*” Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 98.9, commenting on Psalm 98(99):5. Latin quoted from www.augustinus.it/latino/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm (accessed April 29, 2009).

4 I have in mind here especially Paul’s discussion, in Romans 8:18-25, of the groaning that accompanies gratitude in a fallen world—groaning that belongs to hope in such a world and can therefore be understood as a constitutive element of both prayer and adoration.

5 Quoting and paraphrasing Augustine, *Confessiones*, 3.6.11, in J. J. O’Donnell, ed., *Augustine: Confessions*, volume I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27.

6 Translating from the Latin of Augustine’s *Epistola* 130.8.17 (to Proba), as given at www.augustinus.it/latino/lettere/index2.htm (accessed April 29, 2009).

7 I have in mind here John Donne’s poem, “Love’s Diet.” He writes about disciplining, or dieting, the appetite of a lover for his mistress, but the conceit can apply as well, and certainly did apply in Donne’s mind, to the disciplining of desires for God.



PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

is the Warren Professor of Catholic Theology at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

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

We ought to feel free to tell God exactly how we feel. There is no need to dress it up or sanitize it for the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God known by Israel and the Church, God’s people.

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.



STEVEN R. HARMON

is Associate Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

Not about Me

BY MEROLD WESTPHAL

Perhaps a burning preoccupation with oneself can coexist with prayers of thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession, even as it contaminates and domesticates them. But the prayer of praise is a deep decentering of the self.

Our neighbors were visiting a cathedral in Italy with their three-year-old son. He saw a woman kneeling in one of the pews and asked what she was doing, “She’s praying,” he was told. “She’s asking God for things.” A few minutes later his parents found him kneeling in one of the pews. In response to their query, he replied that he was asking God for – gelato!

There is something right about that prayer. After all, Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, if not exactly gelato. But it is the prayer of a three-year-old, a beginner in the school of prayer who is not yet ready even for kindergarten.

I remember reading a list of the five elements of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition (for self), and intercession (for others). It triggered a shocking recognition: I do not know the first thing about prayer. I feel reasonably at home with the last four items on the list. I am comfortable asking for God’s help for myself and for others I care about; I am comfortable asking for forgiveness; and I am comfortable thanking God for the many gifts of divine mercy that have come my way. I am so much more fortunate than so many. But praise?

I have a friend who, when he says grace at mealtime, begins with praise: “Dear Lord, you are great. Your majesty fills the earth.” And so forth. I have to confess to feeling distinctly uncomfortable at such times. It is not that I think there is any insincerity in his prayer or have the least suspicion that he is praying “so that [he] may be seen by others” (Matthew 6:5). It is just that I

do not feel that I could pray that way. It would sound phony to me. So why the relative comfort with items two through five and the dis-ease with the first item, praise?

If we look closely, I think we can notice a difference between praise and the other phenomena under our gaze that will suggest an answer. We can distinguish praise from thanksgiving as follows: to give thanks is to praise God for the good things I have received from God, while to praise is to thank God for who God is, for what Luther calls God's "bare goodness," considered without reference to how I may benefit from it.¹ In the other modes of prayer I petition God for things *I* want or think *I* need, and I intercede for those for whom *I* care. I ask God to forgive *my* sins and to grant *me* the benefits of forgiveness; and I thank God for what God has given *me*. If in the context of corporate prayer, the I is replaced by the We, it is only the size of the self that has changed, not its preoccupation with itself, its interests, and its agenda. But with praise as disinterested delight in the bare goodness of God, I am preoccupied only with God.

Now we can form an hypothesis about why I had to confess that I did not know the first thing about prayer. I was beyond the gelato stage, but not very far beyond. Perhaps there was a burning preoccupation with myself that could coexist with thanksgiving, confession, petition, and even intercession, even as it contaminated and domesticated them. Perhaps I sensed how deep was the chasm to be crossed before words of disinterested delight in God could flow with even a modicum of integrity from my lips or heart. Which brings me to my thesis: prayer is a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself.

That is why praise is fittingly first in the list of the elements of prayer. My focus, however, will not be on praise as I seek to explore the essence of prayer as a deep decentering of the self. My focus will rather be on a kenotic gesture that can be seen as prior even to praise and as the condition for the possibility not only of praise but of all five elements of prayer, insofar as they can be united in a complex whole in which each knows its proper place and plays its proper role.



I begin with the prayer of Samuel as we find it in 1 Samuel 3. The LORD called Samuel, who thought it was the priest, Eli, calling. Three times he runs to Eli, saying, "Here am I, for you called me." Finally, Eli realizes what is happening and tells Samuel next time to respond, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." We can combine the two responses to make up Samuel's prayer, for the first response is more appropriate when addressed to God, who was actually doing the calling, than to Eli. So here is our first prayer: "Here I am for you called me. Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

Samuel does not originate the conversation but is called, called forth, even called into being by a voice not his own. The meaning of the situation in which he finds himself is not determined by his horizons of expectation, which are simultaneously surprised and shattered. Nor is it just his situation that is changed; his identity is changed, as he becomes no longer merely Hannah's son or Eli's helper, but the one who stands *coram deo*, in God's presence, by a call that is at once invitation and command. Everything begins with the "you called me." Prayer is the beginning of responsibility because it begins as response. Samuel identifies himself as the servant before his Lord. He calls himself *ehbed*, a bond-servant.

We can learn three things about prayer from Samuel. We learn how prayer is the task of a lifetime, so that even those who have been praying all their lives may not have gotten much farther than kindergarten. Samuel presents himself to God as a listener; and that is easier said than done. We know from merely human conversations how enormously difficult it is really to listen, to be fully present to our interlocutors. A fortiori, we only kid ourselves, like the tyro who reports that he learned to play golf yesterday, if we think we have finished learning how to listen to God as God deserves to be listened to.

Second, we learn why silence is such an important part of prayer. It is those who seem to know the most about prayer who emphasize this most strongly, and now we can see why. We cannot listen very well to the voice of God if we are chattering ourselves or even if we merely keep ourselves surrounded by noise, almost as a barrier to protect us from hearing the voice of any other. As Johannes Tauler puts it, "And therefore you should observe silence! In that manner the Word can be uttered and heard within. For surely, if you choose to speak, God must fall silent. There is no better way of serving the Word than by silence and by listening."² Prayer needs silence, not only external but also internal silence; for our minds and hearts can be and usually are very noisy places even when we emit no audible sound. God speaks in and as the silence.

Finally, we learn why Scripture and prayer are so integrally intertwined, why prayer can never be separated from some form of *lectio divina*. God speaks as silence, to be sure, but prayer cannot grow in a purely apophatic soil if for no other reason than that in such a context no God personal enough to get prayer started by speaking to us is to be found. If we are engaged in prayer rather than yogic meditation, it is the God who speaks in Scripture for whom we listen in the silence and to whom we listen as the silence. The very call to which we may respond "Here am I" can come as a mysterious voice in the night, but it typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth. Before prayer is a fivefold speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture.



Very closely related to Samuel's prayer is Mary's prayer at the annunciation. This is the prayer that precedes the canticle we know as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), and we can hear this earlier prayer as the prior condition of the possibility of that overflowing outburst of praise and thanksgiving. We might say that in the earlier prayer Mary assumes the posture from which her praise proceeds. The Magnificat is so heavily dependent on the song of Samuel's mother, Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), that we can only assume that Mary also knows the story of Samuel and of his prayer, which is echoed in her own. In response to the angel Gabriel's stunning and scary news about what is soon to happen, she replies, simply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She speaks these words immediately to Gabriel, but she understands him to be an angel, that is, a messenger from God. Ultimately she is responding to God; her words are a prayer.

In this prayer, we find Mary's theology and ethics in a nutshell. The theology revolves around the notion of God as one who speaks or, better, as the One who speaks; for God is not so much First Cause as First Speaker, the One whose word is always the beginning. Here "beginning" signifies not a Self-Explanatory Explainer in terms of which everything can be made transparent and intelligible but rather the fact that before I speak, or act, or even am, God has always already spoken.

In looking at Samuel's "Here am I," the focus was on its secondary nature, and the emphasis fell on the "for you called." Its repetition by Mary gives us the opportunity to look more closely at the act itself. It is an act of self-presentation to the God who is already present. There is no attempt, because there is no need to

find God. Having spoken, God is already present. Mary would easily understand Augustine's notion that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves (*interior intimo meo*)³ and his bittersweet confession, "late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you!

And, look, you were within me and I was outside.... You were with me, and I was not with you. Those outer beauties kept me far from you."⁴ And perhaps she knew enough of the captivating, intoxicating, even addicting power of those outer beauties, physical and social, to be able to understand Augustine's, "Nowhere do you depart from us, and hard it is for us to return to you."⁵ She understands that God is here, unusually so in the

Scripture and prayer are integrally intertwined. Before prayer is a speech act on our part, it is listening to the word of God as found in Scripture.

present instance, and the only question is whether I am willing and able to be here too. No doubt part of the problem is that while the messenger may be quite visible (we do not know the form of her visitation), God is not.

She also understands that to be present to God, she must turn away from the world in which she has been immersed. Not that there is something evil about the world, into which, in fact, God will send her back with a task. It is rather that apart from that turning, the world is defined by her agenda, however innocent, and not God's. As Thomas Merton puts it so beautifully: "detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between 'things' and 'God' ... as if [God's] creatures were His rivals. We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached *from ourselves* in order to see and use all things in and for God."⁶

Mary's prayer is not without models. Perhaps when she says "let it be with me according to your word," she is thinking of the patience of Job, who, in the midst of unbearable suffering and loss, said, "Naked I came from my mothers' womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). His praise was not conditioned on God's word being in conformity with his desire and his agenda. The same can be said of David, of whom Mary might also have been thinking. When his son Absalom had rebelled against him and usurped the throne, David was forced to flee Jerusalem toward the wilderness. Loyal priests and Levites decided to bring the ark of the covenant of God with the royal party in flight. But David said, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him" (2 Samuel 15:25-26). Job says, "I belong to you." David says, "I am at your disposal." And Mary says, "Let it be with me according to your word."

We are reminded in these stories that God allows bad things to happen to good people. In addition to words of promise and words of command, there are what we might call words of permission. For, as the story of Job makes especially clear, in biblical context the pain and suffering that comes our way may have its origin in the fallen freedom of created beings and need not be interpreted as divine judgment or punishment. Neither does it signify impotence or indifference; for without the permissive word of God, Satan would not have been able to torture Job, and the same understanding is implicit in the story of David and Absalom. Of course, Mary may not have had either of these stories in mind. But the condition for the possibility of her *Gelassenheit*, or letting go, is not some sort of Stoic resignation before blind fate but the faith she shares with Job and David that "in all things, as we know, [God] co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose."⁷

While Mary may or may not have realized how her prayer echoed the prayers of Job and David, she surely could not have known how it would in turn be echoed in two prayers of her son. The first is the prayer he taught his disciples to pray. To get a feeling for its force, let us listen to the way it can all too easily be intended:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be my name,
my kingdom come,
my will be done on earth as yours is in heaven.

Even to the most cynical secularist, this is bound to sound like sacrilege. The crassness of this formulation is barely mitigated if we substitute *our* name, kingdom, and will for *mine*. We hear the decentering force of the prayer in its actual wording: *your* name, *your* kingdom, *your* will (Matthew 6:9-10). Here is a triple threat against all aspiration to autonomy, a triple abandonment of my preoccupation with myself. After, but only after I have made this move, I am in a position to pray rightly for material and spiritual blessings, daily bread, and forgiveness, for myself and for "us." And no sooner have I done so than the doxology, which is sometimes included in the prayer and sometimes serves as its liturgical trailer, reminds me of what I can so quickly forget: "for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever." The Amen (so be it) that concludes this prayer, echoes the "let it be" of Mary's prayer, just as the "*your* name," "*your* kingdom," and "*your* will" echo her "*your* word." To feel the full force of the self-transformation called for by this self-transcendence is to understand how learning to pray is the task of a lifetime.

The second prayer, in which Mary's is echoed in that of her son, comes to us from Gethsemane. Anticipating the violent death that is about to strike, Jesus offers perhaps the most basic prayer of petition, which we might call the foxhole prayer: Lord, spare my life. "My

Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." But he prays this prayer from the posture that is its precondition in the sense that in a different posture it would be a different prayer altogether. The posture is that of belonging and disposability: "yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39). Here Jesus remembers the "your name...your kingdom...your will" that he taught his disciples to pray; here he echoes his mother's "let it be

Mary understands that to be present to God, she must turn away from the world in which she has been immersed. Apart from that turning, the world is defined by her agenda, however innocent, and not God's.

with me according to your word," of which he may or may not have known anything; and here he enacts the kenosis celebrated in the early Christian hymn in praise of him who:

emptied himself
 taking the form of a slave . . .
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death
 – even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:7-8

Finally, with respect to Mary's prayer, we can note that as in Samuel's prayer, there is a human silence before the divine word. In Samuel's case, it is the silence of listening that awaits God's word. In Mary's case, it is the silence of meditation that comes after God's word. When the promised son is born, she received another message from God, this one doubly mediated by angels and shepherds, telling her that the boy is "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:11). We read that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). In the silence of this pondering, she once again places herself at the disposal of God's word and echoes in the stillness her earlier "let it be with me according to your word."



The third prayer for our consideration is the prayer of Elvis: "I want you, I need you, I love you with all my heart." I know that it was not a prayer as sung by Elvis. It is addressed to the latest hormonal heartthrob, and the reference to the heart seems to be a euphemism for another seat of desire. But let us imagine the possibility of these words addressed by the believing soul to God. They exhibit the fundamental trope of Hebrew poetry, parallelism, in which the same thing is said a second and even a third time in a slightly different way. In Elvis' version, "I love you" adds nothing new to "I want you" and "I need you." And therein lies the problem. Even when we convert the earthly eros into the heavenly by addressing these words to God, it is all about what I want, what I need, and what I, in those senses, love. The prospects for deepening our understanding of prayer as a deeply decentering posture do not seem very great.

If it is always darkest just before the dawn, we might find our way forward by seeing the problem in its starkest form. When I want to introduce my students to the difference between eros and agape, need love and gift love, where sexual desire is only a single instance of a more general structure, I say, "I love cheese omelet. Would you like me to love you too?" "I love cheese omelet" is a perfectly legitimate use of the word "love" in English. And its meaning here is clear. What I love is what I devour, what I assimilate to myself, what I make into a means to my ends. I give to it a

double career: in part it becomes what satisfies and strengthens me and in part it becomes what I flush away as worse than useless.

Now comes our first glimmer of hope. Even before we convert these words to a prayer, this alimentary attitude begins to unravel as I am deconstructed by my own desire. I want *you*, I need *you*, I love *you*. I can say these words in such a way as to make a sex *object* of the addressee. They can mean "I want you to belong to me so that *you are my thing*; I will dispose of you as I want." This project can be astonishingly and frighteningly successful. All too often it is possible to dominate another, who, in such a setting, becomes codependent on my addiction to myself. But my own word, "you," undermines and rebukes such a speech act. There is a performative contradiction in addressing someone as *you* in order to reduce her to some *it*. It is still about what I want, but, as Buber reminds us, the I that is linked to you is a different I from the one that is linked to it. I am still the one speaking, not the one spoken to, but a certain decentering has begun, whether I like it or even notice it. It cannot address me, but you can. To desire you is to desire vulnerability to alterity.

Now let us return to the supposition that the you to whom I address these words is God. I could hardly mean—or at least could hardly admit to myself that I mean—"I want you to belong to me so that *you are my thing*; I will dispose of you as I want." That is as hopelessly crass as the "my name, my kingdom, my will" version of the Lord's Prayer we considered earlier. But I might mean by "I love you" simply that I want and I need your help, your blessings, the benefits of having you on my side. Here, once again, decentering seems to get derailed by my preoccupation with myself.

But now suppose that what I mean is really "I want *you*," you yourself, not your gifts:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
 so my soul longs for you, O God.
 My soul thirsts for God,
 for the living God.

Psalm 42:1-2a

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
 my soul thirsts for you:
 my flesh faints for you,
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

What has changed here is more fundamental than the replacement of a hunger metaphor with a thirst metaphor, and even more fundamental than the replacement of an "it" for a "you." This is not just any old "you," though what is true in this case may well be true in a measure in relation to human yous as well. But if we ask how it might be possible to "have" or to

“possess” God, to drink of the living water (John 4:7-14, 7:37-39), we will realize that the “you belong to me” path leads away from our goal, and only the “I belong to you – I am at your disposal” path leads to it. God cannot be “had” in any other way. God is always at our disposal, always giving Godself to those who are willing to take. But the only way to take this gift is to place ourselves at God’s disposal, to give not this or that but our very selves to God. The hymn writer gets it right when describing the love between Christ and the believer:

His forever, only His; Who the Lord and me shall part?
 Ah, with what a rest of bliss Christ can fill the loving heart!
 Heav’n and earth may fade and flee, Firstborn light in gloom decline;
 But while God and I shall be, I am His, and He is mine.⁸

Only *after* I am His can it be that He is mine. Kierkegaard calls this taking by giving, this possessing by dispossession, a paradox.

Just to the degree that we are enabled to experience such a miracle, a certain transubstantiation takes place, and water is changed into wine. What I mean is simply this: eros is not merely reconciled with agape; it becomes agape. Need love and gift love, desire and disposability, become two sides of the same coin. Or, if this metaphor still leaves them too distinct, we can speak of moving beyond the experiential space in which the difference between them makes any sense. Tauler expresses this nicely when he says that true prayer is a “loving ascent to God, in profound longing and humble surrender.”⁹ But perhaps we should not get too carried away, as if we occupy such a space very fully or for very long. The two-sides-of-one-coin metaphor reminds us that proximally and for the most part we experience them as distinct and all too easily fall back into such a space even after partial glimpses of their proper identity. Prayer is the task of a lifetime.



Prayer has many postures. People pray standing, sitting, kneeling, and prostrate. They pray with bowed head and folded hands. They pray with hands and face uplifted to heaven. They pray with eyes open and with eyes shut. Prayer engages the body in many different ways. But in speaking of prayer as the posture of the decentered self, I am speaking of a posture of the soul, of an inner attitude of the self that can appropriately express itself in a variety of outer stances. That is why I also described it as the fundamental project of the self. By reflecting on these three prayers, I hope to have indicated in a measure how this posture is possible only to a deeply decentered self.

This self is not its own origin. It does not make itself but rather receives itself in receiving what is given to it by putting itself at the disposal of the gift. What Henri Nouwen says about prayer can be said with equal validity

of becoming a self, which may be only the other side of the same coin: "So, the paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift."¹⁰ No doubt it is a privilege to be gifted; but there is a price. One must abandon the project of being the center in terms of which meaning, and truth, and goodness are defined. To dare to pray is to consider the price worth paying. To mature in prayer is to discover that the price itself is a gift.

But this is the task of a lifetime.¹¹

NOTES

1 See his commentary on Mary's "Magnificat," in *Luther's Works*, volume 21, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 309-312.

2 Johannes Tauler, *Sermons*, translated by Maria Shradly (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 38.

3 Augustine, *Confessions*, III.6.

4 *Ibid.*, X.27; cf. VII.7, "For that light was within and I was out of doors."

5 *Ibid.*, VIII.3.

6 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 21 (emphasis in original).

7 Romans 8:28. The textual witnesses are not in agreement here. I cite the version followed by The Revised English Bible (emphasis added).

8 The hymn by George W. Robinson is sometimes known by its opening line, "Loved with Everlasting Love," and sometimes by its refrain, "I Am His, and He Is Mine."

9 Tauler, *Sermons*, 89.

10 Henri J. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 89.

11 This article is excerpted from my essay "Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self" in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 13-31. It is reprinted by permission of Fordham University Press.



MEROLD WESTPHAL

is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University in Bronx, New York.

Sweet Hours of Prayer

BY RUTH HALEY BARTON

Fixed-hour prayer anchors our daily lives in rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and silence, ensuring that we do not get too far into any day without reorienting ourselves to the presence of God. Praying at least some of the fixed-hours in community can shape our identity as communities of believers.

The first time I participated in fixed-hour prayer, I felt like I had come home to a place that 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 the members of our group had experience with fixed-hour prayer and so he 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 United Methodist Hymnal*. 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.

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 think really, really hard about what to pray, I 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 culturally relevant 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 I have been praying that way ever since.

FIXED-HOUR PRAYER

This affinity for fixed-hour prayer came as a surprise. I had been raised in a Christian home and 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 were not very spiritual and did not have much to say to God needed to rely on prayers that were written by someone else! But I have discovered that there is another option and that is to allow the words of the great prayers of the Church to engage my heart and to really mean them! Many Protestant traditions departed from fixed-hour prayer in "protest" of the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church and the spiritual numbness that the Reformers were trying to distance themselves from. But it turns out that in this distancing we actually lost a rich avenue of prayer that is rooted in Scripture and in our own tradition.

Variouly called "fixed-hour prayer," the "daily office," or "the Divine hours," these prayers are deeply biblical, expressing 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 human soul reaching out to God. There is no better way to *learn* to pray and to actually pray!

Fixed-hour prayer has now become one of the richest aspects of my spiritual life. 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 me 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 inexpress-

ible in deeply satisfying ways and open us to 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."¹ Praying at least some of the fixed-hours in community can anchor and shape our identity as communities of believers.

HOURS OF POWER

As the little group I mentioned earlier continued to meet for prayer and planning regarding a new ministry that was emerging among us, we kept praying the hours together and have continued to this day. Whether we are on retreat together, working together, or even getting together socially, our steadiest commitment is to regularly turn our hearts toward God in prayer in ways that are appropriate to whatever part of the day we are in.²

In the morning, we begin with praise, affirming God's presence with us and his loving care toward us, and committing the work of the day to him.

O God, open our lips and we shall declare your praise.

God said: Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. This very day the Lord has acted!

Let us rejoice!

Praise the Lord!

God's name be praised!

At mid-day, when tasks and to-do lists are pressing in and human effort is at its height, we stop to renew our awareness of God's presence, to rest in him for a few moments and ask for his peace and guidance regarding those things that are concerning us. The opening prayer, or invocation, is always our heart cry:

O God, make speed to save us.

O Lord, make haste to help us.

In the evening, we acknowledge the light that comes from God as the sun sets. We place the cares of the day in God's hand and make the transition from day to evening.

We praise you and thank you, O God,

for you are without beginning and without end.

Through Christ, you created the whole world;

through Christ, preserve it.

Through Christ you made the day for the works of light
and the night for the refreshment of our minds and our bodies.
Keep us now in Christ, grant us a peaceful evening,
a night free from sin, and bring us at last to eternal life.
Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit,
We offer you all glory, honor, and worship,
now and forever. **Amen.**

Later on in evening prayer, we offer up general intercessions for ourselves and others as well as bringing our own specific needs and the burdens we are carrying for others. We are purposely not very wordy in our intercessions because we realize that this is another place in the spiritual life where human striving and fixing can so easily take over. As our own spiritual journey leads us to a greater capacity to be with God with what is true about us, to rest there and let him be in charge of what happens or what does not happen, so we are able to be with others and their needs quietly in God's presence as well.

Written intercessions allow us to join together in lifting up our shared concerns to God and then agree together in prayer by saying in unison,

In peace, let us pray to the Lord.
Lord have mercy.

This kind of prayer relieves us of the burden of thinking that we need to know what someone else needs in order to pray for them. It saves us from trying to tell God what we think the answer is or wrestle some result from him. We recognize that we do not know how to pray for ourselves or anyone else, for that matter, but the Holy Spirit knows. Since we understand that the Holy Spirit is already interceding for us before the throne of grace, we can bring a name or a need, express it simply, and in the silence experience our own groaning and the Holy Spirit's groaning for that person. In this way we are able to stop struggling so much to put things into words and just enter into God's caring love for that person, waiting with them and for them in God's presence. This is a wonderful way to release our burdens to God at the end of the working day.

When we are together on retreat, we close the day with night prayer, confessing our sins, celebrating God's presence among us during the day, and asking him to be with us as we rest.

May God grant us a quiet night and peace at the last.
Amen.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praise to your name, O Most High;
to herald your love in the morning,
your truth at the close of the day.

Since the prayers are written there is nothing for any of us to figure out. Scriptures are taken from the lectionary – a reading schedule that follows the Christian calendar – and are read without comment, giving God the opportunity to address us directly through his word in whatever moment we are in. The Gospel readings in particular help us to stay connected to the person of Christ as the model for our life and work. In this way, we give the spirit of Christ access to us throughout the day. We have been amazed at the way in which the prayers and the Scriptures give us perspective, assurance, and guidance as we have needed it, in ways that could not have been orchestrated by human planning.

Although many of us seek to pray the hours when we are alone as well, we have discovered there is a special power that is released when two or three (or more!) gather around the presence of Christ and find ways to open their hearts to him together.

No matter how alone we might feel on any given day, fixed-hour prayer gives all of us a way to pray with the Church even when we are not in a church. When we engage in fixed-hour prayer we are praying prayers that the Church has written down and prayed for centuries; we join with millions of Christians around the world to say the same thing at the same time. Or, as Phyllis Tickle puts it, “When one prays the hours, one is using the exact words, phrases, and petitions that informed our faith for centuries.... we are using the exact words, phrases, and petitions that were offered just an hour earlier by our fellow Christians in the prior time zone, and that, in an hour will be picked up and offered again in the next time zone. The result is a constant cascade before the throne of God of the ‘unceasing prayer’ to which St. Paul urges us.”³

This way of praying affirms that we are not alone, that we are part of a much larger reality – the communion of saints that came before us, those who are alive on the planet now, and all who will come after us. In a spiritual sense, praying with the Church through fixed-hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions – and that is no small thing.

A DEEPLY ROOTED PRACTICE

I am not alone in my experience of discovering this very old and yet very new way of praying. The practice of ordering our activities around prayer at regular times of the day is being rediscovered and enthusiastically embraced by many Christians today. For those who are unaccustomed to fixed-hour prayer, it is reassuring to know that this is a Christian practice that is rooted in Jewish tradition and in the patterns of the early Church. Indeed it is one of the oldest ways of praying – so old in fact that it is not even taught overtly in Scripture, it is merely assumed. As Scot McKnight points out in his book, *Praying with the Church*, it would have been nearly impossible for Jesus and his disciples to be practicing Jews in the first

century without participating in Jewish rhythms of prayer. In fact, the Psalms were the Hebrew prayer book and practicing Jews prayed from the Psalms daily, providing them with the opportunity to constantly recite those biblical passages that were central to their spirituality.⁴

David alludes to the practice of fixed-hour prayer when he says,

But I call upon God,
and the LORD will save me.
Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.

Psalm 55:16-17

Daniel prayed three times a day in spite of the threat to his life if he did so (Daniel 6:10). Peter received his vision regarding Cornelius while he was saying mid-day prayers (Acts 10:9). And the first healing miracle after the Ascension took place as Peter and John were on their way to three o'clock prayers in the Temple (Acts 3:1). So whenever we pray from the Psalms, we are using the same prayer book as Jesus and his disciples.

The elements of fixed-hour prayer contain a combination of some or all the following elements: an invocation inviting God's presence, a psalm or a prayer taken directly from the Psalms, a scripture reading, the Lord's Prayer, a creed that gives us the opportunity to affirm our faith, a collect or some other prayer of the

church, time for silent reflection, perhaps a hymn, and a benediction or a parting blessing. In many cases, these elements are nuanced to help us turn our hearts toward God in the specific context of the hour being prayed – lauds (morning), mid-day, vespers (evening), and compline (prayer before retiring). It is no wonder these prayers are powerful – they are the spiritual equivalent of a vitamin-packed power drink!

Today, there are many wonderful resources to help us reclaim this particular gift of the Christian tradition. Phyllis Tickle has produced a three-volume prayer book entitled *The Divine Hours* that is a liturgical reworking of the sixth-century Benedictine Rule of fixed-hour prayer.⁵ In fact, as I write this article during the season of Lent, I have been using *Eastertide: Prayers for*

We are part of the communion of saints that came before us, those who are alive on the planet now, and all who will come after us. Fixed-hour prayer expresses that deeper unity that transcends all our divisions—and that is no small thing.

Lent through Easter (taken from *The Divine Hours*) as part of my Lenten discipline for praying through this important season of the Church year. While I cannot pray all four of the hours each day (morning, mid-day, evening, and night), my commitment has been to pray at least one or two of the fixed-hours and that has been a tremendous blessing.

There are two other prayer books I have found to be very useful at different times. One is *Hour by Hour*, an Anglican prayer book based solely on Scripture and *The Book of Common Prayer*.⁶ The other is *The Little Book of Hours*, a prayer book that has emerged out of the shared life of the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical Christian community in the Benedictine tradition.⁷ Both are very slim volumes that are easy to travel with and share with others.

Whatever resources one uses, my recommendation would be to just try it for there is nothing to lose and much to gain. Fixed-hour prayer is a powerful practice for engaging the mind, the heart, the soul, and the body in a rhythm of speaking, listening, and communing which is at the heart of our relationship with God. It is a powerful way of “attending to the eternal timelessness and magnificence of the divine life”⁸ in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life. And God knows we need a way to do that!

NOTES

1 Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 39.

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

3 Phyllis Tickle, *Eastertide: Prayers for Lent through Easter from the Divine Hours* (New York: Random House, 2004), xi-xii.

4 McKnight, *Praying with the Church*, 31.

5 Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Springtime* (2001), *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime* (2000), and *Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (2000) were the original versions from Doubleday. Additional versions for travel or for use with children are currently available.

6 Edward S. Gleason, *Hour by Hour* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 2003).

7 The Community of Jesus, *The Little Book of Hours*, revised edition (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

8 Tickle, *Eastertide*, x.



RUTH HALEY BARTON

is founding president of The Transforming Center in Wheaton, Illinois.

Praying for a Change

BY TODD EDMONDSON

Do petitionary and intercessory prayers bring about real change? We may not openly doubt their efficacy, but the adage “prayer doesn’t change things, it changes us” has become an easy escape to explain away mind-bending puzzles about prayer and to reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

In *The Year of Living Biblically*, A. J. Jacobs chronicles his attempt to obey literally the principles of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures for a twelve-month period. While rigorous attention to diet, clothing, and facial hair prove to be somewhat difficult for the author, no area of his life is more radically challenged by his experiment than his attitude toward prayer. Jacobs commits to the discipline of praying three times a day, and throughout the book gives an honest account of what he perceives to be happening as he engages in this practice. On day 103 of his year, he says the following about Abraham’s prayer on behalf of Sodom, as it relates to the practice of intercession today:

It’s actually a noble, beautiful – if ultimately doomed – attempt to save the life of his fellow humans.

I’m not finished with my year, so I’m withholding judgment, but my rational side says that intercessory prayer today is no more effective than Abraham’s effort. I still can’t wrap my brain around the notion that God would change His mind because we ask Him to.

And yet, I still love these prayers. To me they’re moral weight training. Every night I pray for others for ten minutes – a friend about to undergo a cornea surgery, my great-aunt whose sweet husband died in their swimming pool, the guy I met in a Bible study class whose head was dented in a subway accident. It’s ten minutes where it’s impossible to be self-centered....

The Bible says not to boast, so I'm not going to say that I've turned into Albert Schweitzer or Angelina Jolie. But I do feel myself becoming a slightly more compassionate person.¹

A pragmatic, psychological, even therapeutic approach to the practice of intercession is what readers might expect of a writer approaching the Judeo-Christian tradition from within the mainstream of Western culture. What may be more alarming is the inescapable reality that in just three months, a self-professed, lifelong agnostic like Jacobs has arrived at a perspective on prayer that is not markedly different from that held by many longtime Christians. We have an enormous amount of trouble coming to terms with how petitionary and intercessory prayers might bring about real change. We may not openly admit to skepticism about the efficacy of prayer, but the adage "prayer doesn't change things, it changes us" has become an easy escape to explain away some of the mind-bending obstacles to our understanding of prayer and to reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

When we think about the place that prayer has occupied in the Christian imagination for two millennia, however, and especially when we open the pages of Scripture, we cannot help but conclude that such a perspective, however neat and tidy it might be, is profoundly unsatisfying and contradictory to what the Church has long held to be true. The story of Abraham's pleading for Sodom is not only a story about Abraham's compassion, but also about God's willingness to listen to his servant and take his request seriously. On reading the biblical accounts of Hannah praying fervently for a son (1 Samuel 1) or of Samson pleading with God that his strength might be returned (Judges 16), we are drawn by these stories to affirm not just that these characters were somehow changed, but that events actually happened in the world as a result of their petitions.

New Testament perspectives on prayer are no less challenging to our modern sensibilities. Jesus' prayer for his followers, "I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15b), and Peter's prayer over the lifeless body of Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42) were intended to have real consequences, external to the intercessors' psyches. Later, Paul urges the Ephesians to take their stand against the wiles of the devil, encouraging them to "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication" (Ephesians 6:18a). This exhortation is presumably designed not just to make them feel better about the struggle in which they are engaged, but to help them win that struggle. For the heroes of faith who populate the pages of Scripture, prayer was neither a therapeutic method of self-realization nor an arcane superstition useful only for propping up the traditions of the past. It was solid and real – perhaps the most solid, most real thing that they knew. So when the author of James encourages his readers to be steadfast in prayer because "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), the

effects he is talking about are not merely inward stirrings of the soul, but rather what we might call the “real-world” effects of prayer.

Once we decide to abandon the notion that prayer only changes us in favor of a more radical, robust, and biblical view of prayer, how do we bear witness through our words and deeds to the power of prayer? How do we keep this practice at the center of the Christian life, even in the midst of a culture that is defined by its skepticism toward what it does not understand? Addressing these questions will not be easy, for after thousands of years of faithful practice and reflection, prayer is still very much a mystery to us. Explaining away the mystery would be impossible, and probably undesirable. But we should pursue some understanding of how we believe prayer works. To do so, it may be necessary for us to reconsider how we customarily think about prayer and to recover perspectives that have been lost over the years.

HOW PRAYER AFFECTS GOD

To embrace prayer as a force for change, we must stop thinking of it as just a human action. For when we envision prayer solely as something we do, as a work of human agency, it is almost impossible not to see it as a ritual designed for our benefit, as an incantation in which only the most superstitious or simple-minded people believe. Instead, it is helpful to re-envision prayer as a relationship involving God, the world God has created, and the Church. In this way it becomes possible to see prayer as neither therapy nor superstition, but as a very powerful process through which God accomplishes his purposes and transforms reality.

The profound difficulty that looms over and shapes any serious discussion on prayer is the same one that A. J. Jacobs confronted — whether “God would change his mind just because we ask him to.”

It is imperative that we wrestle with the notion of

how prayer affects God, but we must proceed with caution. We want to avoid what C. S. Lewis calls an “agent-patient” relationship, in which God is the patient and our prayers act to manipulate or otherwise coerce God’s work.² At the same time we want to steer clear of the rationalistic extreme that posits an indifferent God who is not in any way moved by the petitions or intercessions we lay at the altar of prayer, or a system in which human

Once we abandon the notion that prayer only changes us in favor of a more radical, robust, and biblical view, how do we bear witness to the power of prayer, especially in a culture defined by its skepticism toward what it does not understand?

reliance upon divine intervention, or even divine concern, is a bit of out-moded naivety.

Within the pages of Scripture we encounter a certain level of tension on the issue of how the prayers of men and women might affect God. This is probably not a surprise. On the one hand, there is Baalam's second oracle, which states "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23:19). Or consider Samuel's rebuke to a disobedient King Saul: "Moreover the Glory of Israel [God] will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind" (1 Samuel 15:29). Even as Saul seeks to win back God's favor, God's resolve to reject the king still stands. This doctrine of divine immovability is challenged, however, by the story of King Hezekiah's illness. On receiving the news that he will soon die, Hezekiah prays to the Lord, and God provides a direct answer within moments through the prophet Isaiah: "I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you" (2 Kings 20:5). In this story, as in others scattered throughout the Bible, we encounter a God who is not inattentive to the prayers of those he loves, but rather hears and responds when his children cry out to him.

Much of Jesus' teaching on prayer illustrates God's willingness not only to listen to the intercessions of his people, but to answer them as well. In the Sermon on the Mount when he tells us to ask, seek, and knock, we are promised that these actions will have real results (Matthew 7:7-8). When Jesus compares God to a parent willing to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:9-11), or contrasts God with an unjust judge who responds begrudgingly to a widow's persistent request (Luke 18:1-8), he wants us to understand that God is not indifferent to our requests. The God of Jesus' teaching does not strike us as impassible, at least not in the sense in which impassibility is commonly understood.

Certainly we do not change God with our prayers: the nature, character, and promises of God remain steadfast and eternal. However, if we see prayer not just as something we are doing, but instead pause to consider how the Triune God is involved in our prayers—the Son at the right hand of God constantly making intercession for us (Romans 8:34), the Spirit virtually praying through us "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26)—it would seem remarkable if God the Father, by virtue of his eternal nature, foreknowledge, or providence, were somehow excluded from the process. Why should we imagine that God would be unmoved, not only by the prayers of his people, but also by the constant intercession of the Son at his right hand and the Spirit moving within his Church?

Even as it has striven to affirm the doctrines of eternal providence and the unwavering nature of God, the Church has also vigorously defended its conviction that God does respond to the prayers of the faithful, in accordance with his nature and with his promises to do so. As Augustine says, "Prayers are useful in obtaining these favors which he foresaw he would

bestow on those who should pray for them.”³ To say that God answers prayer, then, or even to say that God does specific things as a result of our prayers, is not to question God’s foreknowledge, restrict God’s freedom, or place God at the mercy of our manipulation. It is rather to say that God acts as God has promised to act – that he will hear the prayers of his people and will bestow favor upon those who ask. John Calvin, in the same manner, exhorts his readers not to use God’s foreknowledge or providence as an excuse for neglecting prayer: “Both are true: ‘that the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps’ and yet that he is inactive, as if forgetting us, when he sees us idle and mute.”⁴ Prayer, therefore, does not coerce God, but rather creates space for him to act in our lives in a manner according with his purposes.

Kelly S. Johnson helpfully compares the practices of intercessory and petitionary prayer to requesting an encore after a popular music performance:

At the end of the concert, people clap and stomp and yell for more, expecting that the best songs have been saved for the end.... The audience knows that the band hopes for this outcry. They even plan for it. Nevertheless, they wait for the audience to ask.... The cheers of the audience, which the band has worked to create, now become the cause of the band’s doing just what it wants to do, with renewed vigor – playing the best-loved piece of their repertoire.⁵

After we have encountered in Scripture and in the life of the Christian community the awesome work of God, we are moved to ask for more. And God, like a performer who rightly takes great joy in his magnificent work, is more than happy to grant our request.

When God responds to our requests by continuing his performance, this is manifest in the world around us. As God’s love is revealed, and as God delights in showing his favor to those who ask for it, the realities of the creation in which we live will inevitably be caught up in this process. Our asking for daily bread, our intercession on behalf of a dying loved one, or our pleading for the cessation of violence and injustice in this world are sanctified within the context of prayer so that they become far more than mere human requests. The prayer of petition “lifts earthly needs into the light and the love of God,” Karl Rahner observes; “these things are pulled into that movement that carries everything.”⁶ This sanctification of our burdens is a mysterious work, just as our own sanctification in Christ is a mysterious work. That God would move to act against the bodily sickness of one individual, to bring reconciliation within one wounded marriage, or to protect one of his servants facing a dangerous trial is in many ways unfathomable to us.

But if receiving the answers we seek is hard for us to understand, failing to receive those answers is even more so. The conundrum of so-called

“unanswered prayer” is among the most vexing problems that any Christian will ever have to deal with. It led C. S. Lewis to remark that “Every war, every famine or plague, almost every deathbed, is a monument to a petition not granted.”⁷ Each of these crushing disappointments, and many more besides, threatens to harden God’s people against prayer, and to bolster the rationalistic suspicion that prayer does not really change things anyway. But in the end, these disappointments do not tell us that prayer is ineffective in the “real world” anymore than Jesus’ pleading in Gethsemane or his cry from the cross proves his relationship to the heavenly Father was somehow lacking. Instead, the problem of unanswered prayer reminds us of what we already know: that like anything else worth our time, prayer is a difficult business. This is why so many of the scriptural exhortations to prayer come to us in the language of the battlefield. This is why preachers and teachers and writers on the faith from the first century to the twenty-first remind us that it is not with the weapons of this world, but with prayer, that we will overcome the principalities and powers who seek to make this world in their image.

That our prayers to God would bring the realities of this world into contact with divine purposes, or that God would join us in our this-worldly struggles, should not strike us as odd or irrational, because it is exactly what God has been doing for thousands of years. The witness of Scripture and the testimonies of many Christians assure us God has acted in amazing and wonderful ways in this world already, often in response to the requests of his people. Indeed, other methods of affecting change and other recipients of our trust—from politics to technology to military might—would seem to be far less proved than prayer, if our memories were not so short and our imaginations so easily manipulated by the kingdoms of this world.

HOW PRAYER CHANGES US

We must acknowledge that the practices of intercessory and petitionary prayer do, in fact, change those individuals who stand before God to present their requests. Nor should we diminish the significance of prayer’s effects on the Church in the fulfillment of God’s purposes in this world. If we truly believe that we are the body of Christ, and that the Holy Spirit works in us and through us, not just for our own individual benefit, but for the glory of God’s name and for the proclamation of God’s kingdom, if we accept that we have been called to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth, then it matters very much how we are transformed into worthy stewards of this vocation. Since the days when Christ first established his community of witnesses, prayer has been a necessary part of the equation. Among the tools that Christ committed to his earliest followers, prayer was the most important and effective.⁸ Jesus knew that these men and women, flawed as they were, had been commissioned to accomplish a work that they could never do on their own. If they were not constantly receiving

strength from another place and allowing that strength to flow through them and out of them, they would fail.

The congregation that desires to do the work of God in the world but fails to ground that work entirely in regular practices of prayer will find its work frustrated and ultimately fruitless. Experience tells us that work without prayer, no matter how noble or well-intentioned that work might be, is severely limited. We will be doomed to attempt only what is within the reach of our stunted imaginations and to achieve only what our meager capacities make possible. If, on the other hand, we allow those imaginations to be renewed like the man's withered hand, if we allow our capacities to be multiplied like the loaves and fishes of the Gospels, there is no end to what God might accomplish through us. Throughout Scripture and the history of the Church, the manner in which God's people have been fitted for the tasks before them has always been prayer.

But along with making us more effective workers, more equipped to do what looks like "real" work, the habit of prayer also makes us more effective at prayer. Just as with any skill, regular practice of prayer shapes us into bolder petitioners, more compassionate intercessors, more active participants in this three-fold relationship among God, the world, and the Church. As we pray, together and alone, God transforms us as believers and as communities of believers – not to feel better about our place in the world (this is not mere therapy), but to take on the mind and spirit of Christ, so that the light of God's glory can shine through us and change the world in profound and previously unimaginable ways. "When we have immersed ourselves long enough in the way of Christ," Richard Foster says, "we can smell gospel. So we ask and do as we know he would ask and do."⁹

Through the Spirit, God's presence in this world is revealed in us, and prayer is not incidental to this process.

This does not mean, of course, that any amount of prayer will make us perfectly faithful, or that any amount of time spent in earnest petition and intercession will take away our

skepticism completely. Our doubts may always plague us. One of the most humorous stories in Scripture describes an early Christian prayer meeting in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, on the night of Peter's miraculous rescue from prison (Acts 12:6-17). When Peter shows up at the outer gate, those gathered for prayer inside immediately assume it cannot be Peter standing outside; after all, he was locked in prison! Only after he con-

The regular practice of prayer shapes us into bolder petitioners, more compassionate intercessors, more active participants in the three-fold relationship among God, the world, and the Church.

tinues to knock and then proceeds to tell them plainly what had happened do they believe that their prayers have been answered.

Even our mothers and fathers in the faith were capable, like us, of doubting that the things they prayed for might actually happen. But their doubts did not stop them from praying. They did not stop rehearsing the stories of how God answers prayer. They did not stop participating in the awesome exchange that takes place when God's people, burdened with the cares and concerns of the real world, lay their requests before their heavenly Father. For God, out of the love that is at the very center of his nature, responds.

NOTES

1 A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 128.

2 This is the topic of Letter IX in C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 46-50.

3 Augustine, *City of God*, V.10 (New York: Image Books, 1958), 110.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.20.3, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 853.

5 Kelly S. Johnson, "Praying: Poverty," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 228.

6 Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 57.

7 Lewis, 58.

8 O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994; original edition, 1931), 64.

9 Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992), 195.



TODD EDMONDSON

is Senior Minister of Lincoln Trail Christian Church in Irvington, Kentucky.

When Gathered Saints in Common Praise

BY BURT L. BURLESON

When gathered saints in common praise
their litanies of thanksgiving raise,
the closed and burdened soul is freed
by prayer transcending lesser need.

Familiar clasp and faithful knees
are altars of compassion's pleas;
a kindness sent in Jesus' name
is prayer that's shared to heal the pain.

To see the truth, to name the sin,
the broken ways confessed again,
that meet redemption in a place
where prayer can know abiding grace.

By wordless love in silence found,
by presence stilled in Being's ground,
a timeless Word will play its part
through prayer God speaks into the heart.

When Gathered Saints in Common Praise

BURT L. BURLESON

KURT KAISER

1. When gath - ered saints _____ in com - mon
 2. Fam - il - iar clasp _____ and faith - ful
 3. To see the truth, _____ to name the
 4. By word - less love _____ in sil - ence

2
 praise _____ their lit - a - nies of thanks - giv - ing
 knees _____ are al - tars of com - pas - sions -
 sin, _____ the bro - ken ways con - fessed a -
 2 found, _____ by pres - cence stilled in Be - ing's -

4

raise, the closed and bur - dened soul is
 pleas; a kind - ness sent in Je - sus'
 gain, that meet re - demp - tion in a
 ground, a time - less Word will play its

freed _____ by prayer trans - cend - ing less - er -
 name _____ is prayer that's shared to heal the -
 place _____ where prayer can know a - bid - ing -
 part _____ through prayer God speaks in - to the -

8

need.
 pain.
 grace.
 heart.

8

Worship Service

BY BURT L. BURLESON

Call to Worship

As we turn aside from all else...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we declare our faith...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we acknowledge our need...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we search for wisdom...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we listen for your call...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

As we lift up our hearts...

Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

Chiming of the Hour

Silent Meditation

Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of our whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. All good, meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) †

Introit Hymn

“When Gathered Saints in Common Praise”

When gathered saints in common praise
their litanies of thanksgiving raise,
the closed and burdened soul is freed
by prayer transcending lesser need.

Familiar clasp and faithful knees
 are altars of compassion's pleas;
 a kindness sent in Jesus' name
 is prayer that's shared to heal the pain.

To see the truth, to name the sin,
 the broken ways confessed again,
 that meet redemption in a place
 where prayer can know abiding grace.

By wordless love in silence found,
 by presence stilled in Being's ground,
 a timeless Word will play its part
 through prayer God speaks into the heart.

Burt Burleson (2009)

Tune: GATHERED SAINTS, Kurt Kaiser (2009)
 (pp. 51-53 of this volume)

Unison Prayer of Thanksgiving

**We praise you, our God,
 for your love revealed to us in Jesus Christ
 and brought near to us by your Holy Spirit.**
**We praise you, our God,
 for bringing us from bondage into freedom
 and making of us one body in Christ.**
**We praise you, our God,
 for calling us to this place of prayer.**
Make our worship worthy of your love toward us. Amen.

Hymn of Confession

Please pause for silent confession between stanzas

"Just as I Am"

Just as I am, without one plea,
 but that thy blood was shed for me,
 and that thou bidst me come to thee,
 O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
 sight, riches, healing of the mind,
 yea, all I need in thee to find,
 O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Charlotte Elliott (1835)
Tune: WOODWORTH

Praying with the Psalmist (based on Psalm 80)

Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead us like a flock;
you who are Holy and Other;
light the way before us.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty and merciful God,
we join our hearts and lift them to you now in prayer for one another.
**Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.**
For those who have wandered away from you we pray...
**Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.**
For those who are in need of healing we pray...
**Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.**
For those whose homes are broken we pray...
**Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.**
For those who are confused and lonely we pray...
**Restore us, O God,
and cause your face to shine upon us.**
We pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Offering

The Reading of Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-16

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The Word of the Lord for God's people.
Thanks be to God.

Hymn of Preparation

"Blessèd Jesus, at Your Word"

Blessèd Jesus, at your Word
we are gathered all to hear you;
Let our hearts and souls be stirred
now to seek and love and fear you,
by your teachings sweet and holy,
drawn from earth to love you solely.

All our knowledge, sense and sight
lie in deepest darkness shrouded,
till your Spirit breaks our night
with the beams of truth unclouded.
You alone to God can win us;
you must work all good within us.

Brightness of the Father's face,
Light of Light, from God proceeding,
make us ready in this place;
ear and heart await your leading.
Fill with life and inspiration
every prayer and meditation.

Tobias Clausnitzer, 1663; translations of vv. 1 and 2 by Catherine Winkworth, 1858; of v. 3 by Robert A. S. Macalister (1870-1950), altered.

Tune: LIEBSTER JESU

Sermon

Departing Confession: Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith,
with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience
and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess,
for he who has promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to spur one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

NOTES

† Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958), 40.



BURT L. BURLESON

is University Chaplain at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Our Deepest Prayer

BY TERRY W. YORK

Waiting here, in silence, God,
we hear and own our deepest prayer.
Until this silence we'd forgotten
that these words were hidden there.
Resurrect to Life and Light
what we have buried in our night.

Amen.

Terry W. York

This hymn, “Waiting Here, In Silence,” is one of two texts written in response to a request by Burt Burleson, then pastor of DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, and the musical shepherd of the congregation, Kurt Kaiser. At the time, my wife and I had been members of DaySpring for about a year. The request was that I write some lyrics that describe my thoughts about DaySpring – why we joined and what this worshiping community had come to mean to us. The poetic exercise was a calming and reassuring experience. It was good to identify and capture these thoughts so that they would not fade with routine and familiarity.

DaySpring Baptist Church is a special Christian community. Its attention to things sacred and simple – in its grounds and buildings, but especially in its worship – facilitates listening to the still small voice.

WAITING HERE, IN SILENCE

“Waiting” is exactly the right word to begin this simple, sung prayer. But this is not anxious, red-light-at-the-intersection waiting. This is not standing with two items behind someone with twelve items in a ten-item checkout line. This is waiting of a deeper sort and it involves the entire self: body, mind, and soul. It is focus and surrender and an emptying. This waiting sits astraddle the line between the physical world and the spiritual world, leaning against the thin veil, listening in stereo.

Waiting of this magnitude requires silence rather than music as a background, focus rather than distraction. Silence alone can house the respect, honor, and awe that are due the prayer that will enter this private void. Silence of this sort is akin to, but deeper still than what we experience just

before the first word of the sermon is spoken or just after the last note of the symphony has faded away. It is the silence that bids us to whisper as we approach the rim of the Grand Canyon or enter the nave of a great cathedral. That kind of silence is created by, and is the environment of, this kind of waiting. A particular physical environment may enhance this stillness and waiting, but the crucial environment is within the geography of the soul, an inner space. Then the prayer is heard.

WE HEAR AND OWN OUR DEEPEST PRAYER

The sound enters the void slowly, muffled at first, a whispered shouting as if from under a heavy trap door. We recognize the voice. It is our voice. Going deeper into the waiting and the silence we discover something rather unsettling about the voice we hear. It is not a single voice. It is a duet that calls—our voice, yes, but our voice in harmony with the voice of the Holy Spirit. God is down there in the middle of all we have hidden from him. Not only do we recognize the forgotten echo of our voice, we recognize our waiting on God as we see it reflected in God's waiting on us. What a holy place is this place of silence, waiting, and deep prayer.

Our deepest prayer is our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God's waiting.

UNTIL THIS SILENCE WE'D FORGOTTEN

We know the location of the place of waiting. We have to know it in order to avoid it. Waiting is the foyer, the entranceway to the place of hidden things. We tuck things away in there and walk away. We can stay away if we are busy enough or if our surroundings, even our liturgical surroundings, are noisy enough. Yes, noisy enough. We know the weight of silence. We have learned that silence and waiting pull us toward that voice and that place and all that is hidden there.

We have long understood that overloaded calendars and daily schedules are not just about things that must be accomplished, that endless television, radio, and iPod music are not just about entertainment, that drinking is not just about being thirsty, and that eating is not just about being hungry. These are our avoidance techniques and ways to forget, but only God can completely forget our sins and failures (Hebrews 8:12). Such avoidance techniques are futile attempts to be God rather than to turn the matters of our deepest prayer over to God. Ironically, even shallow prayer can be a way of avoiding our deepest prayer.

Waiting in silence after our words have faded, anticipating (or risking) the difficult internal conversation of deep prayer, makes silence an uncomfortable and, for many, an unwelcome experience. As a defense, waiting is quickly labeled "unproductive" (a terrible accusation in our society) and silence "a missed cue" (inexcusable in the context of performance). These defenses that we set up in fear, block instead the path to rejoicing. The fear

is not silly. It is unnecessary, but not silly. It is true that a conversation with God at that depth of soul could spark confrontation, a struggle between what we want to keep buried and what God wants to resurrect for the purpose of redemption. It is right to enter that conversation knowingly, soberly, but not with fear of retribution. It is our loving God who waits for us even as we wait, and meets us in the silence to converse in deepest prayer. We eventually relax and understand that God does not wait in ambush. God waits in anticipation of liberating us, if we will but allow it.

RESURRECT TO LIFE AND LIGHT

We understand the power of forgiveness, perhaps, one might say, all too well. We also understand its cost. We turn away when we see forgiveness in its most stark and raw forms. Recall the murder of the Amish school children in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006. We admired the immediacy and depth of the forgiveness shown by that community, but we turned away from it as well. It is difficult to look for very long at such shining. Such soul searching and illuminating brightness and purity is too convicting. We call on righteous indignation to come to our rescue, but it is confusing. With whom should we be angry at such a display of forgiveness—the Amish, Jesus, or ourselves? The Amish reaction reached to the very depth of our souls, putting at risk strangely treasured personal emotions of anger and rage.

“Unfair” is a big word and “getting away with it” is a powerful phrase. Yet, by harboring these expressions of pride and fear we allow the hurt and hate to rip at our souls, to continue to devour us at whatever pace they wish. Forgiveness sends the beasts away (“One little word shall fell him”). Jesus taught us the meaning of the word, also its cost. He also showed us the new life forgiveness brings.

“Remorse” and “repentance” are on the same carefully guarded vocabulary list as “unfair” and “getting away with it.” In God’s care, “remorse” and “repentance” are cleansing words. In our hands, watching for remorse and listening for

repentance are effective ways to postpone forgiveness. They also “baptize” our addiction to “pay back.” Like all other addictions, this one hurts us. “Payback” and “revenge” make us eager participants in violence. That power, in our hands, corrupts us, indeed. God suggests that we leave such things to him (Romans 12:19). They are far beyond our finite mental and emotional abilities.

Going deeper into the waiting and the silence we discover something rather unsettling. God is down there in the middle of all we have hidden from him.

There are happier resurrections, the results of which are equally as freeing. The deep place of the little song and the big conversation is not just a place where sins and failures and destructive emotions are hidden. The place of our deepest prayer is also where we hide dreams and hopes that are too wonderful to seriously consider, even though it might well have been God who first whispered their possibility into our hearts and minds.

Releasing to the light our hopes and dreams carries the same risk as releasing our sins and failures, the very same risk. It is the risk of exposure, of being found out, to our embarrassment. "You *dreamed* what?" and "You *did* what?" are quite similar. Both expose the death of something within us. But resurrection awaits our deepest prayer.

The denial of hopes and dreams is as sad and painful as the denial of sins, failures, and frustrations. Hopes and dreams are private treasures that sustain us when all else is taken away. To relegate such life-giving possibilities to the same dark hole as life-draining sin and secrets is to declare our hopes and dreams dead before arrival. They must be brought to life and light.

It is easy to forget hopes and dreams. Or is it? Perhaps it is better said that we can more easily justify their suppression. Having used arguments of "humility" and "reality" to do the unpleasant and costly work of the suppressing, we dare not wait in silence to hear and own our deepest prayer. We fear that silence would needlessly expose us to the risk of reliving the disappointment and self-doubt. Why go there? If all it takes is busyness and noise to avoid such heartache, turn up the volume and load up the calendar.

A M E N

If "waiting" is exactly the right word to begin this song of prayer, then "Amen" is exactly the right word to end it. Of course, says the astute reader, this is a prayer; we are supposed to say "Amen" at the end. But "Amen" is the right word because it matches "waiting" in its courage and commitment. In general lay-terminology, "Amen" means "so be it," or "let it happen." Saying "Amen" does not end the thought, the wrestling, or the encounter. "Amen" is to be to us on our feet what "waiting" is to us on our knees. If waiting is the prelude to deepest prayer, saying "Amen" is the prelude to action.

The action of the Amen necessarily begins with accepting God's love and forgiveness—believing it to be true, as humbling as that is. Without this first step, we might as well sing "The End" instead of "Amen." It would fit musically.

The next action of the Amen is giving oneself to waiting, not being in charge, not being in a hurry. Amen will have it no other way. It is no small thing to give oneself to the complete control of someone else. This happens in routine matters like boarding an airplane. It also happens on the rare occasion such as "going under" anesthesia before surgery. The trust level is

profound. Waiting is of the same magnitude because what has been tucked away under one's control is about to be given over to God who delights in the act of freeing and liberating.

Next in the Amen process comes the conscious act of embracing silence. For some people silence is punishment or a curse, for others it is a sabbath. For the Christ-follower who prays "Amen" and means it, silence must become a familiar place and state of being. Without this silence—listening with body, mind, and soul—Amen cannot be accomplished

Listening to what? Listening to our deepest prayer and admitting that it is true. It is our dream and desire, or it is, indeed, our confession. Amen demands that this listening to and owning of the truth of our deepest prayer take place.

Notice how the Amen is taking us back through the sung prayer. Amen is a connection, not disengagement. The Amen attaches our prayer to our life, the moment just passed to the future just begun. The Amen declares that the words of our deepest prayer will no longer lie trapped, unattended and haunting.

Amen shuts the door on darkness, sealing the resurrection to life and light of what had been buried. There will be no more night for what has been confessed. There will be no more night for what has been dreamed. Both have been liberated by the singer's courageous entrance into waiting and silence. Amen blesses our deepest prayer as it rises and soars, answered and set free by forgiveness or redemption.



TERRY W. YORK

is Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Waiting Here, In Silence

TERRY YORK

KURT KAISER

Wait - ing here, in si - lence, God, we hear our own, our

4

4

deep - est prayer. Un - til this si - lence we'd for - got - ten

7

7

that these words were hid - den there. Re - sur - rect to

This image is available in
the print version of
Christian Reflection.

**In Jean-François Millet's *THE ANGELUS*, the prayerful
humility of the peasants seems wholly genuine,
reflecting their response to the grandeur of God's
work in nature.**

*Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), THE ANGELUS (1857-1859). Oil on canvas, 21.8" x 26".
Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: © The Bridgeman Art Library International. Used by permission.*

A Call to Prayer

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The subject of a bidding war in 1889 between the Louvre and an American consortium, Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* sold for an unprecedented sum of 580,650 francs. During a subsequent tour around the United States, it was publicized as the most famous painting in the world.¹

The work shows a peasant couple bowing their heads in prayer as the evening Angelus bell tolls. In this thrice-daily devotion – morning, noon, and evening – the church bell calls followers to a prayer of gratitude for the goodness of God expressed through the Incarnation. Millet, who was raised in a peasant family in Normandy, recalls that “his grandmother, hearing the church bell ringing while we were working in the fields, always made us stop work to say the Angelus prayer for the poor departed.”²

Millet nostalgically evokes a lost golden age. His classical composition is saturated with Realist detail.³ Pastel colors (which anticipate the Impressionist style) relate the landscape to the earth-toned clothing of the peasants. Though he is often described as part of the Barbizon school of French painters inspired by the landscape realism of John Constable (1776-1837), he was also influenced by themes from Scripture and paintings by the Old Masters.

After the 1848 Revolution in France, a peasant revolt that spread fear in Europe, Millet's paintings were negatively reinterpreted as fostering a too grandiose view of the common people. So, by 1909 *The Angelus* had dropped out of favor and was ridiculed for having a rigid gender differentiation.⁴

Though our estimate of a work of art will always be influenced by our attitude toward its cultural, political, and religious context, perhaps the time has come for us to appreciate *The Angelus* as an honest depiction of a prayerful response to God's presence. Certainly Millet admired the simple lifestyle of the peasants whom he preferred to paint, and was sympathetic with their political plight. Yet in this image the prayerful couple's humility seems wholly genuine, reflecting their response to the grandeur of God's work in nature between them and the church shown in the distance.

NOTES

1 Heather McPherson, “Millet, Jean-François,” in *Grove Art Online*. *Oxford Art Online*, www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T058295 (accessed May 30, 2009).

2 “Jean-François Millet, *The Angelus*,” Musée d'Orsay Works in Focus, www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/the-angelus-3048.html?no_cache=1&Hash=64e2246289 (accessed June 16, 2009).

3 McPherson, “Millet, Jean-François.”

4 Ibid.

This image is available in
the print version of
Christian Reflection.

**With a cruciform gesture of prayer, Saint Apollinaris
inspires calm assurance and an attitude of prayer in
those who approach the altar of the Lord in the
congregation he protects.**

The Orant

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

The mosaic in the eastern apse of San Apollinare in Classe, Italy, depicts the protector of the congregation, Apollinaris, in prayer. This Byzantine church combines Early Christian architecture with the eastern style of mosaic painting brought there by Emperor Justinian, who reigned 527-565.[†] The church was modeled after San Vitale in Ravenna, which is located only four miles north of Classe, the Adriatic seaport for Ravenna.

According to church history, Peter appointed Apollinaris to be the first bishop of Ravenna, and he died a martyr, probably in Classe, during a persecution of Christians under the rule of Emperor Vespasian (69-79). Bishop Maximilian consecrated the church in his memory in 549.

The depiction of Apollinaris in the center of the lower portion of the mosaic incorporates two traditional representations of early Christian art. The saint's arms are uplifted in the traditional cruciform gesture of the orant (from the Latin for "person who prays"). His position among twelve sheep in green fields with trees, flowers, and birds recalls the symbol of Christ as Good Shepherd that is common in catacomb paintings.

The twelve sheep near Apollinaris represent the congregation that he protects and should not be confused with the twelve disciples, who are also represented as sheep in an upper section of the mosaic. The disciple-sheep, which are painted on diagonals radiating from the central image of a blessing Christ, guide the viewer's eye back to the figure of Apollinaris. The two sections of the apse are united by symbols for the Savior Christ (a jeweled gold cross in a large blue medallion) and God the Father (we see only the hand of God).

Modern day viewers may be forgiven for misidentifying Saint Apollinaris as Christ the Good Shepherd until on closer review they recognize the robes of a bishop. As this protector of the congregation prays for his flock, he inspires calm assurance and an attitude of prayer in those who approach the altar of the Lord.

NOTE

[†] For more information on the architecture of San Apollinare in Classe, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Immigrant Churches," *Immigration, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008), 55-62.

Retreat: A Time to Listen to the Groans

BY TREVOR HUDSON

On a spiritual retreat we slow down our busy lives to listen deeply to those things we so often do not hear. We listen to God by praying the Scriptures. We also listen to the groans of creation, of our own lives, and of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

One of the most special gifts of being on retreat is that it gives us space to listen deeply. In the silence and the solitude we are able to slow down, quieten ourselves and hear those things that we so often do not hear. While the primary way we listen to God on retreat is usually through praying the Scriptures, I want to complement this traditional emphasis with another kind of listening. A way of listening that gradually draws us out of our self-absorption and egocentricity into a deeper participation in God's dream of mending our broken world. Retreat, I would like to suggest, is also a time to "listen to the groans."¹

In order for us to explore what it may mean on retreat to listen to the groans, I want to look at Paul's remarkable passage in Romans 8:22-27. These verses come midway between two other popular biblical passages. At the beginning of the eighth chapter there is a wonderful verse, a favorite of evangelicals, declaring that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. At the end of the chapter there is the magnificent statement, a favorite of universalists, that neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The passage about the groans falls between these two statements. There is no shortcut from the first part of the chapter to the last part. We cannot bypass the groans—especially when we are on retreat. As New Testament

scholar Tom Wright has pointed out, verses 22-27 are the means by which these two great affirmations are grounded in theological and practical reality.² Retreatants need to heed these words. Otherwise it is very easy for our retreat experience to become other-worldly, abstract, and irrelevant to the world in which we are called to live out our faith.

These verses tell us that three voices are groaning at the same time. They groan all around us, as well as within us, all the time. If we listen deeply, we can hear each one. Listening to these voices together helps us to find our way into God's purposes for our lives. As we listen to these groans we are drawn into a deeper faithfulness, both in our personal discipleship and in our life together as God's people. Most importantly, when we listen to these groans, we begin to have a much clearer understanding of how we can play our part in God's healing of our fractured world.

CREATION GROANS

First of all, when we are on retreat, we can listen more deeply to the groans of creation. In verse 22 Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." This powerful image makes it clear that God is passionately concerned about the whole world. When we are on retreat our hearts and minds need to be deeply grasped by this reality. Too often our retreat experiences encourage a false individualism that results in us turning our backs on the world that God has made and loves and wants to save.

It is so easy for this to happen. I remember being taught songs soon after my conversion as a teenager that encouraged me to view the world as an enemy to the saving work of Christ. I sang, "The world behind me, the Cross before me...."³ Yet the cross is in the world. Christ gets crucified there, before our eyes and our ears, every day of our lives. Did he not say, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40)?

Another song I sang went like this: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of the earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."⁴ Although I think I can understand what the songwriter intended by this, I have found that the things of the world grow strangely clear in the light of Jesus Christ. Surely, since Jesus Christ is the light of the world, we can see its beauty and pain even more clearly, and hear its laughter and cries more deeply. When we open our hearts and minds to Jesus in our moments of retreat, we are drawn more deeply into the world that he loves so much and for which he died.

Songs like these often betray God's fierce love for the healing of the whole world. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son...." Paul knew this, and so his concerns were always cosmic in scale. This also needs to be part of our awareness when we retreat to be with God in silence. We must know that God's loving arms wrap around the globe and embrace

every human being. They embrace every aspect of what it means to be human—the world of arts and music, and finance and economics and education and medicine and politics and sport. God’s arms embrace the trees and mountains and forests and rivers and every other living thing. God longs to put the whole world right. As Hans Kung has written, “God’s kingdom is creation healed.”⁵

Now, if our retreat experience is going to help us play our part in God’s story of mending our world, we need to hear in the silence the groans around us. This is what happened to Desmond Tutu when he was on a five-day silent retreat in May 1976. According to his biographer, John Allen, he entered the retreat with his emotions in turmoil.⁶ While sitting in his cell-like retreat room, the groans of the oppressed pierced his heart. He felt himself called to write immediately to the then President of South Africa, John Vorster. “I felt this pressure. I had to do this, and just sat at my desk. The letter more or less wrote itself.”

In the letter he pleaded for the President to do something “because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon, then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably.” Tutu’s letter was dismissed out of hand. As we all know, one month later, the Soweto uprising exploded. In the ten months following June 16, 2006, at least 660 people were killed, most of them under the age of twenty-four. Our history could have been so wonderfully different had our President taken seriously the way God had spoken to Desmond through the groans of the nation.

Retreat is a time for us to listen to the groans around us. In the silence we can begin to think and reflect around questions like: What are the human cries that surround me? At home? At work? In the community? To which one is God calling me to respond? Which are those that frighten me and from which I want to flee? What is God saying to me through these cries? Questions like these can so often deepen our capacity to listen and to respond to the groans in our midst.

WE GROAN

Secondly, when we are on retreat, we can listen more deeply to our own groans. Paul vividly captures the tension in which we as followers of Christ live: “Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly” (Romans 8:23a). On the one hand, we experience the joy of the Spirit at work in our lives, the joy of being called God’s beloved children, the joy of knowing that our sins have been forgiven, the joy of being bonded together with brothers and sisters in the faith from every tribe and nation and tongue, the joy of knowing that we are living an indestructible life with an eternal future in God’s great universe. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has made all this possible and we celebrate it joyfully.

Yet, on the other hand, we who are part of God's family also groan and we need to listen and attend to our own groans. In 1978 I had the opportunity of working in a small, ecumenical inner-city congregation in Washington, called the Church of the Saviour. One day just before I came back to South Africa, I was having a cup of coffee with the pastor of this remarkable congregation, a man by the name of Gordon Cosby. I asked him a question I sometimes ask people I respect. "If you could say one thing to me, what would it be?" He was quiet for a few moments, and then he answered, "When you go back to South Africa, and minister in your congregation, remember always that each person sits next to their own pool of tears."

Retreat, I want to suggest, is a time to listen to these tears. In this respect another New Testament image speaks to me powerfully. It is the picture of the risen Christ coming to Mary as she weeps outside the empty tomb. He asks her, "Why are you crying?" Jesus' question invites Mary, and us too, to face the story behind our tears. Like Mary we are invited to examine our pain, to put words to our sorrow, to allow our tears to find their voice. We could be crying for any number of reasons – because I am missing my loved one so much, because my marriage is in trouble and I cannot see a way forward, because my divorce has ripped my life apart, because I am in the dark and do not know what to do, because my body is in pain and I cannot seem to find relief, because of the deep guilt I feel for something I did in the past, because God seems so far away and I do not know where to find him.

On our retreat we can share these tears with God. Many of the Psalms teach us to do this. They show us how to talk simply and honestly to God about the deep groanings of our hearts and lives. Too often we only think about our pain in God's presence. We need to tell God about it. The psalmist repeatedly encourages us to speak

aloud to God about the painful things we are going through. Think for a moment about some of the sentences we come across when we read the Psalms. Sentences like, "I cried out to the Lord," "Hear my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help," "How long, O Lord, how long?" Befriending our tears like this connects us deeply with God, opens our hearts to healing grace and enables us to be more present to the tears of others.

In the silence of retreat we can reflect on questions like: What are the human cries that surround me? At home? At work? In the community? To which one is God calling me to respond? What is God saying to me through these cries?

THE SPIRIT GROANS

Lastly, when we are on retreat, we can also listen to the deepest groan of all, the groan of the Spirit. As Paul points out in this passage from Romans, not only are we prayed *for* by the ascended Christ, we are also prayed *in* by the indwelling Spirit. “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). This groan of God’s Spirit is the groan of deep intercession. Often when we open ourselves to the pain of our world, and our own pain too, we come to the end of words. But the good news is that, in those moments when we do not know how or what to pray, the Spirit of God is taking the prayer of Jesus and praying it in our own depths.

Think about this profound mystery with me for a moment. There is a continual prayer meeting going on in our hearts 24/7. We are never prayerless! We carry prayer around with us all the time. As we have seen, the Spirit is doing the praying that we cannot do. God the Spirit, who shares in the groaning of creation and in our own groaning, is calling out to God the creator, praying the prayer that resonates in Jesus’ own heart for the healing of the whole world. There is always, as Tom Wright reminds us again, a deeply Trinitarian shape to Christian prayer.⁷

Retreat is a time for us to listen deeply to the groaning of the Spirit who intercedes for us right here, right now. We do not need to get too mystical about this. We are not left clueless about what the Spirit may be praying. We know that the Spirit does not talk on the Spirit’s own authority. Rather, the Spirit takes the prayer of Jesus and prays it within our own hearts. It is the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom into our midst, a prayer for God’s will to be done, a prayer for heaven to come to earth, a prayer for the mending of our broken world. Retreat gives us a wonderful opportunity to listen carefully to the particular way in which the Spirit may be praying the prayer of Jesus within our own personal lives.

Here is a story that means a lot to me. There was a certain monk who was to an extraordinary degree a man of prayer, someone absolutely carried away by prayer, which was his constant occupation.⁸ He was asked once how he had reached that state. He replied that he found it hard to explain. “Looking back,” he said, “my impression is that for many, many years I was carrying prayer within my heart, but did not know it at the time. It was like a spring, but one covered by a stone. Then at a certain moment Jesus took the stone away. At that, the spring began to flow and has been flowing ever since.” On retreat we ask Jesus to take away the stone from our hearts, so that the prayer which lies there like a hidden spring may begin to overflow throughout our lives and our congregations and our ministries and throughout God’s world.

RESPONDING TO THE GROANS

As we listen to the groans, we will want to respond. Retreat experiences

often water our desires to participate in some practical way in God's dream for a healed world. But where do we begin? Very simply, we can ask God — "What particular groan has my name written on it?" This is what all the great Christ-followers have done — people like Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and others — by listening deeply to that groan on which their name was written, they sought to discern their own unique call to live out some little piece of God's dream within God's world. This can happen on retreat for you and me too. Such a question, when accompanied by deep reflection, wrestling prayer and planned action, draws us out of our small world of self and ego into the larger more spacious world of God and our suffering neighbor. In this way our retreat experience serves to carry forward God's purposes both for our lives and for our world.

NOTES

1 This article appeared in *Conversations*, 7:1L (Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University, Spring/Summer 2009), available online at www.conversationsjournal.com. This material is excerpted from *Listening to the Groans: A Spirituality for Ministry and Mission* by Trevor Hudson with Stephen Bryant. Copyright 2007 by Upper Room Books®. Used by permission from Upper Room Books®. To order, phone 1-800-972-0433 or www.upperroom.org/bookstore.

2 N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 1992), 68.

3 "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," lyrics attributed to Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-c.1929).

4 Helen H. Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," (1922).

5 Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (London, UK: William Collins, 1977), 231.

6 John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 153-155.

7 N.T. Wright, 76.

8 André Louf, *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little about Prayer*, translated by Hubert Hoskyns (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 21.



TREVOR HUDSON

is a member of the pastoral team at Northfield Methodist Church in Benoni, South Africa.

Prayer in Eclipse

BY KEN MASSEY

My prayer life, long eclipsed by emotional pain over my daughter's tragedy, changed in the past year. I can only attribute this to the prayers of Jesus. Apparently, when I could not pray, he never stopped. I no longer have much faith in the "power of prayer," but my faith in the power of God is emerging from eclipse.

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

Luke 22:31-34

I was never a big scorer on the basketball court so I worked hard to be a tenacious defensive player. When my team was preparing to face the leading scorer in our area, I begged for the defensive assignment. "Put me on him, coach. I'll shut him down." I still have slow-motion dreams of that guy knocking down nineteen points in the first half. *Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation!*

Simon Peter suffered from the same sort of self-confidence — the untested kind. Jesus had conferred his kingdom upon the disciples (Luke 22:28-30). They would "sit on thrones and judge the tribes of Israel." But the road to glory would test their faith. Jesus prayed for them because he knew that Satan would "sift them like wheat."

Sifting is the necessary and useful process of separating the wheat kernels that become daily bread from the husk or beard which is discarded.

The ancient practice of sifting began by placing the heads of grain in a sieve. The sieve would be shaken violently to accomplish the separation. The Adversary, Jesus warned, would do something like this to the disciples. Their faith would go through a brutal process of separation.

Jesus' warning should have reminded Peter of the way Job's faith was sifted by Satan. Job became the poster child for suffering and spiritual struggle. Simon, however, did not make the connection, so he responded to Jesus like a warrior who has not yet been deployed to the front lines of battle. He bragged with bluster and bravado about his bulletproof faith, but he had never been sifted by Satan. He did not understand the situation.

Like Simon, I claimed the husky exterior necessary for ministry. "Are you sure you want to take the pulpit out of the sanctuary?" the kindly deacon asked me. "Yes, it really creates a barrier between me and the congregation," I said with conviction. "I think you're going to get some pushback from Ms. Snodgrass," he replied. "Sometimes you just have to jump over the side of the boat, like Simon," I assured him. Texans love a good skirmish.

When the Persian Gulf War broke out in 1990, two deacons who were veterans of World War II dropped by my office because they had just noticed there was no American flag in our sanctuary. They wanted a show of patriotism in a time of national conflict. I wanted to stay clear of anything that approximated nationalism or civil religion. "That's a fight you can't win," said a friend. He was right, but I was not going to acquiesce. After all, I thought, Simon was ready to draw his sword to defend Jesus!

I learned early on that you better have thick skin to be a pastor. You cannot let the pressures get to you. All the while, beyond my hearing, Jesus was praying for me, "Father, protect his faith." I did not understand that the real sifting was still to come.

"TO SIFT YOU LIKE WHEAT"

In 1997, my oldest daughter Kristen had a psychotic meltdown at age fourteen. It was the first episode of many on a dark descent into mental illness that shook my life and faith to the core. Before this event Kristen had been a sweet and fun-loving child, full of sunshine. She was an average student with above average musical ability.

Like a powerful magnet erasing a computer hard drive, that initial trauma wiped out much of Kristen's cognitive ability. She worked hard to make her way back but never reached the capacity she had before. Each subsequent occurrence left her more incapacitated. She now lives most of her life in fantasy and delusion between dependence and quasi-independence. She has meltdowns of frustration, anger, and self-mutilation. My wife and I care for her at home, and we never know what each day will bring.

The Synoptic Gospels record the story of a woman who suffered much under the care of many doctors and spent all her money searching for a cure

(Mark 5:25-34; cf. Matthew 9:20-22 and Luke 8:43-48). Instead of getting better, she grew worse. My family has never been able, however, to touch the hem of Jesus' garment; and we have looked and reached everywhere.

As I entered this "valley of the shadow," I learned and practiced every prayer in Richard Foster's lexicon of divine dialogue. Many faithful believers added theirs. I have nothing but praise for the support we have received from our congregation and friends. Yet by every visible measure, our prayers have failed to have a positive impact on Kristen's well-being.

At some unconscious point, I wrote off God's intervention and went into survival mode. I attempted to make Kristen's world what it needed to be "without God's help." I gave her the mercy and love that God was withholding. Like the main character in William P. Young's novel *The Shack*, I was enveloped in a "Great Sadness." The Psalmist's complaint described my prayer life:

But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
like the mute, who cannot speak.
Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
and in whose mouth is no retort.

Psalm 38: 13-14

I had read about the dark night of the soul. I had some concept of grief and its stages. I was familiar with the concept of projecting, especially in times of emotional flooding. Being sifted, however, was not a neocortical experience. There were days and weeks when I could not utter "Help thou my unbelief!" or "Why have you forsaken me?" I went past *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and looked into the abyss of *Deus defunctus* (the dead God).

Job's severest test was likely the death of his children (1:13-20). In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan could not accept the reality of the goodness of God because of the great suffering and death of children.¹ A professor of religion at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill shared with NPR that he had been a confessing Christian but eventually abandoned the faith because of the moral problem of suffering in our world.² I have yet to find a theodicy that really understands the situation.

Jesus prayed that Simon's faith would not "fail" as he was sifted like wheat. The word translated "fail" means to "eclipse" or "pass by." That describes what happened to my prayer life. It was eclipsed by emotional pain and overshadowed by the spiritual struggle.

Something has changed for me in the past year, however, which I can only attribute to the prayers of Jesus. Apparently, when I could not pray, Jesus never stopped. When I was buried in chaff, he was trying to dig me out. My faith found a resting place in Jesus' prayers for me rather than in

my prayers to him. I no longer have much faith in the “power of prayer,” but my faith in the power of God is emerging from eclipse.

“BUT I HAVE PRAYED FOR YOU”

I performed the wedding of a young couple, and six months later the new husband walked into a robbery and was shot dead. The widow sank into dark despair, coming out occasionally for fits of rage. She eventually lost her job but did not care. Her family and friends shared her suffering but not in a way that seemed to lighten the burden. Her faith went into total eclipse.

It had been over three years since the tragic turn in her life when she came by to see me. Her demeanor was different. She was not smiling, but she was erect, alert, and engaging. “I got face to face with my depression,” she began. “Tell me about it,” I replied.

“Last night, the familiar darkness began to wash over me as it has done for so long. Only this time, I didn’t drink more wine, eat more ice cream, or curl up on the couch. I stood up and demanded to know what it wanted from me. I yelled and even commiserated with it for over an hour. In the process, I named it Ms. Fogbottom because of the way it moved in, turned everything gray and shut me down.”

“Something changed after that fight. It wasn’t like happiness washed over me. It was more like some weight fell off my heart or like I had cracked out of an egg shell. For the first time in forever it felt like maybe God didn’t hate me. What do you think that was?”

I smiled and said, “I think the end of your eclipse might be near. Jesus has been praying for that, you know.”

NOTES

1 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Chapter 4 (“Rebellion”).

2 Bart Ehrman, “The Gospel Truth: Sometimes a Little Hazy,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 4 March 2009.



KEN MASSEY

is Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Prayerful Intimacy

BY D. LESLIE HOLLON

Prayerfully yielding to the Spirit means the Spirit is free to instruct our minds, inspire our hearts, empower our spirits, and embolden our bodies. As we desire, receive, and obey, the Spirit grows us from the inside out. When we conclude praying, we find ourselves saying “Amen” with joy.

Recently, I made a major life decision. Prayer was an essential resource for me to make the right decision. Actually the decision involved many people. God provided prayer for all of us to discern and discuss so that each of us could uncover the best way forward. Prayer has always been a heavenly link for earthly living.

We sense prayer’s power since the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Sarah on pilgrimage, Moses and Joshua in the wilderness, David and Nathan in the king’s palace, Jeremiah and Baruch in exile, Jesus and the disciples in the Garden, Paul and his companions outside Macedonia, and John and the angel during exile on Patmos. Prayer is God’s invitation for us to be in communion with him. If we ask, we will receive intimacy; if we seek, we will find insight; if we knock, the door for courageous involvement opens (Matthew 7:7).

Knowing this promise to be true from past experiences, I trusted that prayer’s promise would hold true for my present situation. When the Pastor Search Team of San Antonio’s Trinity Baptist Church was talking with me about the possibility of becoming their Senior Pastor, I knew I needed to pray “big time.” I recalled Phillips Brooks’s insight that “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance but laying hold of his willingness.” Aligning our

will to a prayerful awareness of God's will becomes the key for successful decision-making. As our human will seeks alignment with God through prayerful intimacy, our lives are altered by the prayerful insights received and by the involvement we offer after saying "Amen."

Jesus embodied this truth. He promised that when we pray in his name, our prayers would be accomplished. While praying in a full awareness of Christ's presence, the "what" and "how" of our praying becomes purified. During our prayerfulness, we are changed. What we pray in the end may be very different than our prayer's beginning. Jesus modeled this for us in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39). At first he prayed for what he most wanted: "This cup to pass from me." Then he yielded his will to the Father's purposefulness: "Not my will, but your will be done." Then when Jesus prayed for the third time, he concluded with an "Amen" that prepared him for the cross.

As I prayed during a six-month period about whether or not to move, I felt my will being aligned with God's larger purposefulness for all our lives. When I prayed for openness to the move, I sensed the Spirit saying, "Feel the freedom to not be afraid." When I prayed to withdraw from the possibility of moving, I felt as though I had stepped on the warning tracks of "bruising the Spirit." When I knelt to pray, I felt like I was kneeling into the prayers of other people who were also praying about the same matter. When I prayed about moving from one level of commitment to the next level of going forward, I sensed the Spirit saying, "Trust me. Just trust me. I will lead you." After accepting the call, and as I was driving the nearly twelve hundred miles from Louisville, Kentucky, to San Antonio, I sensed the Spirit calming me with the clarity, "Trust Me and I will provide what you will need to fulfill my vision." The clarity I received from these prayerful experiences give me the ongoing clarity that I now need as Trinity's Senior Pastor.

DESIRE FOR INTIMACY WITH GOD

My desire for intimacy with God is a common desire. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until we find rest in thee" (*Confessions* 1.1). We hunger to live intimately with God. Prayer enables us to know more of God and to know that we are known by God. Prayer enables us to walk with, talk to, and listen to God. With revolutionary equality, prayer is available to everyone, everywhere, any time because God loves us equally and desires for each of us to know his love.

Since we are a diverse people with sixteen personality types who live in diverse circumstances, we need various ways to commune with God. Consequently there are more than a hundred ways to pray. We can pray with or without words, early in the morning or late at night, and whether we are happy or sad, glad or mad, tired or rested. We can pray with eyes open or closed, kneeling or standing, with hands folded, lifted high, or

holding a hoe. We can pray when confused or clear, with prepared words or spontaneous expression. We just need to pray humbly and through the Spirit of Christ.

During a recent Wednesday's press, I was inspired by the tenacious desire of people to live intimately with God, others, and themselves. The day began with a pre-dawn breakfast with a group of men – all accomplished in their differing vocations – who wanted to pray with one another and talk meaningfully about life lessons learned. Each event of the day followed the other in prayer: a visit with a man whose wife who had recently died; a gathering of women who meet weekly to pray, sing, study, and share; a meeting with a university leader who cast a prayerful vision; a prayerful staff meeting to discern ministry needs; a large conversational luncheon for people to meet and greet meaningfully; a funeral service that became a worship experience guided by prayer; a graveside service that ended with a crescendo of prayer; an evening meal that became a resting place for a tearful young woman who wanted to connect with her church family; the faith family at a midweek worship service, praying prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication; a Bible study which opened with Paul's admonition for Christians earnestly and lovingly to pray for the knowledge and use of their spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1); talking with a family who was deciding to join the congregation; meeting with a man in preparation for his baptism; loving, laughing, and praying with my wife; texting a prayer to a man whose wife had just suffered a miscarriage; reviewing the day's experiences; prayerfully writing; and falling asleep in renewed awareness of God's goodness and graciousness.

THE SPIRIT OF PRAYER

Several years ago I returned to my home place in Boerne, Texas, for a catch-up visit with Dad and Mother. As our sharing progressed through the night, Mother contentedly fell asleep in her den chair. While Dad and I continued, I explained to him that I was learning about God's leadership in our lives. "God will show us the vision we are to pursue," I said. "However, God will only give us the specific signs to follow as we need them. I call this 'confirming signs of the Spirit.'" Dad smiled and said, "We will call it C.S.S." Subsequently when we talked, we asked each other for C.S.S. updates. When he passed away, I changed my license plate to C.S.S.

Jesus explained that the Holy Spirit counsels, comforts, and confronts us. Through each of the Spirit's actions we are given a C.S.S. We are responsible for our response to the Spirit. If the Spirit *confronts* our conscience, then we are to examine ourselves and get realigned to God's best intentions. If we are confused about what to do next, we are to pursue the Spirit's *counsel* and to act on the wisdom we receive. If we are anxious, we are to allow the Spirit's *comfort* to bring our disease into ease.

After my freshman year at Baylor University, I worked as a summer missionary in Oregon. My primary responsibilities were to pastor a house church, preach in revivals and camps, and serve the community in a logging village. My real objective was to “get the Holy Spirit.” I wanted to live the Spirit-filled life. To satisfy this yearning, I filled my suitcases with books about the Holy Spirit. By summer’s end, I had learned more about the Spirit but I did not have more of the Spirit.

My yearning and questing continued until I learned the secret. God had never intended it to be a secret. A gift? Yes, which is why spiritual gifts are called “grace gifts.” A second blessing? Yes, if we understand that there are continuous blessings of transformation that the Spirit ushers into our lives. What then is the secret I learned? *Yielding*.

Prayerfully yielding to the Spirit means the Spirit is free to instruct our minds, inspire our hearts, empower our spirits, and embolden our bodies. Since at birth we are made in God’s image, we have the Spirit with us in the beginning. Since our belief in Christ, we have the Spirit helping us to believe. But the Spirit has much more for us, and this more unfolds as we continually yield our will into God’s will. As we desire, receive, and obey, the Spirit grows us from the inside out. When we conclude praying, we find ourselves saying “Amen” with joy.



D. LESLIE HOLLON

is Senior Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

BY JOHN ESSICK

The journey on which Christ's model prayer takes us is a dangerous adventure. Our teacher, after all, was crucified for living out its petitions. Praying in the way Jesus taught does not simply make us better people; praying in this way makes us Christian.

A student visiting the Abbey of Gethsemane once asked Thomas Merton (1915-1968) why he had chosen to waste his life by living in a Trappist monastic community. Merton responded politely and profoundly: "I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation."[†] His gentle response to the student's question highlights the relevance of prayer in an otherwise busy and bustling world. The utter commitment to the life of prayer apparent in Christians such as Merton suggests not only that prayer matters, but also that it is a practice that must be inculcated through long repetition if it is to become something resembling a vocation.

The Gospels consistently present Jesus as an effective teacher. His friends (and opponents) often address him as "Teacher" or "Rabbi." It is not surprising, then, that his disciples would request a lesson on the critical subject of prayer. Since he rarely responded in expected ways to queries directed to him but routinely challenged the motives and assumptions of the questioners, it is a bit surprising that Jesus answered the disciples' enquiry regarding prayer with such straightforward instructions. The model prayer he taught his disciples to pray, or "the Lord's Prayer" as it is more commonly known, is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13. A slightly shorter version is found in Luke 11:2-4. The three books under review here—N. T. Wright's *The Lord & His Prayer*, William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas's *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, and Kenneth W. Stevenson's *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*—provide complementary approaches to learning, praying, and living this prayer.



N. T. Wright's *The Lord & His Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996, 89 pp., \$10.00) is an excellent introduction to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer and their practical import for the life of the Church. Wright argues that the prayer Jesus taught his disciples "sums up fully and accurately...the way in which he read and responded to the signs of the times, the way in which he understood his own vocation and mission and invited his followers to share in it" (p. 2).

Contextualization is the overwhelming strength of Wright's treatment of the Lord's Prayer. In six brief chapters, he explores the ways in which the prayer calls for justice, bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. He elucidates the prayer's petitions by locating phrases such as "Our Father" and "Forgive us our trespasses" in their biblical, historical, and cultural contexts. Where forgiveness of trespasses is concerned, for example, Wright calls attention to the image of a father running to welcome his son home in Luke 15:11-32 (often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son) as an image of what it means to be about the business of forgiveness: "We need shocking stories like the Running Father, because our generation has either forgotten about forgiveness or trivialized it" (p. 50). Wright observes that in Matthew's version of the prayer, in addition to "trespass" imagery (6:14) the idea of "debt" is prominent in the forgiveness petition (6:12). In explaining this feature of the prayer, Wright reminds us that the first act of those Jewish revolutionaries who took control of the Temple at the beginning of the war against the Romans was to destroy the debt records housed there. The point Wright makes with this historical example is that Jesus is connecting forgiveness with justice and peace, "the great old biblical command of Jubilee" (p. 55).

This book is the product of a series of sermons Wright delivered in 1995, and as such, its publication is intended to impact the Church's worship and witness. Wright's conversational writing style is on full display in this quick read. He avoids academic jargon and scholarly quotations. For those interested in practical ways of incorporating the Lord's Prayer into their daily lives, Wright suggests three habits. First, use the prayer as an outline for daily prayer by focusing on particular situations or needs associated with each petition. Second, repeat the prayer slowly, meditatively, intentionally, and rhythmically until it becomes a habit of spiritual breathing. Third, consider adopting one petition each day and make it a "lens through which you see the world" (p. 9). In so doing, Wright believes, Christians will learn to pray and live in the way Jesus taught.



Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life by William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 112 pp.,

\$11.00) portrays the Christian faith as a prayer that must be learned. Like Wright, the authors explore the petitions of the prayer individually in brief chapters. While they occasionally delve into the historical and cultural context of the prayer, Willimon and Hauerwas primarily focus on how praying this prayer will bring Christians into conflict with the prevailing assumptions and teachings of contemporary North American culture.

Instead of reducing Christianity to a set of doctrines or beliefs, Willimon and Hauerwas employ language of “journey” throughout the book as a way of speaking about the radical, odd, and altogether unique nature of God’s kingdom: “The prayer names the danger you will face as well as providing the help—the necessary skills—you will need for negotiating the dangers of the journey” (p. 15).

Another theme in this study is that praying this prayer is first and foremost a communal act. “Our Father” is a reminder that one prays this prayer with friends and that one never prays alone. Indeed, saints from ages past pray with us, “leaning down from the ramparts of heaven to join their voices with ours...” (p. 29). “Our Father” also reveals that God has a face and a name. This means, among other things, that “God stands as judge against all human fatherhood” (p. 31). Thus, praying “Our Father” redefines social and familial relations in light of the God who creates, saves, and redeems through the person of Jesus.

Willimon and Hauerwas describe the Lord’s Prayer as a political act: in praying for “Your kingdom” to arrive, “politics has crept into our Christian praying” (p. 50). It is natural, then, that the Church has an opinion on how one will vote, have sex, and spend money. Thus, in praying for God’s reign and daily bread and forgiveness, the Church engages in a power struggle against the kingdoms of this world, kingdoms that do not relinquish power easily.

One of the authors’ most interesting observations is the utterly outrageous nature of the prayer. Could any human act be more outrageous than forgiveness? Prevailing logic on forgiveness might assume that radical forgiveness creates doormats and victims who refuse to speak or act against injustice. Turning such logic on its head, however, Jesus commands his followers “to take charge, to turn the world around, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of retribution and vengeance” (p. 84).

In *Lord, Teach Us*, Willimon and Hauerwas offer a compelling introduction to the repercussions of praying the Lord’s Prayer. The journey on which this prayer takes us is a dangerous adventure. Our teacher, after all, was crucified for living out its petitions. Praying in the way Jesus taught does not simply make us better people; praying in this way makes us Christian.



Kenneth W. Stevenson’s *The Lord’s Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004, 304 pp., \$22.00) is a fascinating

examination of the biblical, historical, and liturgical theology of the Lord's Prayer. It is a treasure trove of useful commentary, interpretations, and contextual analysis by Christians who have used the prayer over the centuries.

After explaining the scope and method of his study, Stevenson surveys the early history of the prayer. In the first century the prayer evolved as a liturgical text. Theologians like Tertullian (d. ca. 225), Cyprian (d. 258) – the earliest known writer to refer to the prayer as the *dominica oratio* (the "Lord's Prayer") – and Origen (d. ca. 254) commented on the prayer. Apart from these authors, the prayer received little attention in treatises during this era.

Due to the wealth of commentary and extensive liturgical utilization of the prayer beginning in the fourth century, Stevenson devotes two chapters to the prayer's place in the eastern and western churches. Matthew's version of the prayer became the standard text used in daily prayer and at significant liturgical moments such as baptism and celebration of the Eucharist. Prominent eastern authors like Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), and western writers including Jerome (d. 420), Augustine (d. 430), Isidore of Seville (d. 636), and Bede (d. 735) wrote extensively about the prayer. The western sources are more numerous and varied than those from the East, which leads to a terrain of interpretation that Stevenson describes as "rich and plentiful" (p. 94).

Stevenson touches on later eastern writers before moving to a comprehensive study of the Lord's Prayer in the medieval West. Three major changes in writings on the prayer stand out. First, diverse genres emerged as writers produced commentaries, meditations, and allegories of the Lord's Prayer. Second, sermonic expositions on the prayer became more relevant to all parishioners rather than focusing solely on catechumens and the newly baptized. Third, vernacular translations of the prayer became increasingly necessary as a means of instructing the faithful.

After the medieval era, Stevenson's treatment focuses largely on the reception of the Lord's Prayer in the English-speaking world. During the Renaissance and Reformation, the prayer retained an important liturgical function for Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans (p. 184). All three groups benefited greatly when the printing press made possible wide distribution of vernacular translations of books of worship (e.g., *Book of Common Prayer*) that included the Lord's Prayer. A final chapter on the prayer's use in "Modernity and Beyond" brings the discussion into the present.

The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition is a wonderful introduction to the textual history and history of interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. Stevenson's command of the vast amount of material is matched by his ability to distill the information in an interesting and user-friendly format. One need not be a liturgical theologian to make use of this resource. More importantly, it is clear that the Lord's Prayer has always resided at the heart of Chris-

tian worship. As much as this prayer is prayed by individuals in various contexts, Stevenson's study underscores the Church's liturgical tradition of praying this prayer corporately and routinely.



These three books—*The Lord & His Prayer, Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, and *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*—form a nucleus of historical context, theological commentary, and practical application for teachers interested in guiding others through the nuances of the Lord's Prayer. All three works attest that learning to pray the Lord's Prayer does not simply shape our Christian vocation. Praying it is our vocation. Nowhere is the intersection of praying and believing more evident than when the Church, doing as Jesus taught, dares to pray "Our Father."

NOTE

† E. Glenn Hinson, a personal friend of Merton, recounted this story in a lecture "What I have Learned in Fifty Years of Teaching" at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky on March 6, 2009.



JOHN ESSICK

is Assistant Professor of Church History at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky.

Exploring the Forms of Prayer

BY BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

A quartet of books provide a systematic way of thinking about prayer, sensitive answers to our questions, and deep reflection on the significance of prayer.

Jesus' first disciples pleaded, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). That there are thousands of books on prayer today suggests that we are far from knowing how to do it. That we still use the Lord's *model* prayer as our default prayer may indicate, among other things, that we have not moved beyond the basics. Indeed, Thomas Merton sums up the situation for all of us when he writes, "we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" (p. 37). Richard Foster opens his text by saying, "For a long time I have wanted to write on the subject of prayer. To do so, however, would have been to commit the sin of presumption. I was not ready" (p. xi). He goes on to admit that he is "still a novice."

This situation reminds me of Augustine's remark about the nature of time: "Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know."¹ We usually assume we know what it is to pray, but when we think about what is involved in prayer, we realize that we have a multitude of questions. On the one hand, we wrestle with what kinds of prayer are appropriate, when to pray, and how to overcome the myriad of distractions that either keep us from prayer altogether or prevent us from being focused while we pray. On the other hand, a primary question for many of us is the subtitle to Philip Yancey's book: "Does It Make Any Difference?" That is, does God "change his mind" when we pray, which seems to be the case in certain passages of the Old Testament, or is the change entirely within us?

The books reviewed here — Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Steven Chase's *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer*, Richard Foster's *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, and Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer* — form an excellent quartet, since each gets at something different about prayer, despite many points of overlap and agreement.



If you resonate with the questions mentioned above, then Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, 352 pp., \$21.99) will be particularly helpful. He raises a string of questions. Why pray? Does prayer change God? Is there a proper "prayer grammar"? What do we do with unanswered prayer? Fortunately, he is also good at providing some answers to these questions, even if he (quite appropriately) only takes those answers so far.

Prayer, says Yancey, is about communing with God. But he makes it clear that this communing often takes the form of wrestling, pleading, and even expressing anger toward God. The result is a conception of prayer that is not exactly a tranquil "I come to the garden alone" and a demurring "They will be done." As to change, prayer certainly changes us, not just us as individuals but as communities. Yancey recounts some powerful instances in which Bishop Desmond Tutu uses prayer to quiet angry mobs. Taking on a much bigger challenge, Yancey wrestles with the conflict between the idea of a God who does not change and the idea that prayer could somehow change God. At one point, he quotes the Calvinist Andrew Murray, who claims that "God does indeed allow Himself to be decided by prayer to do what He otherwise would not do."

As to whether there is a special language of prayer, Yancey concludes that biblical psalms give us the model of a communication with God that is very much like how we communicate with anyone. What about written versus spontaneous prayers? Yancey cites Phyllis Tickle, who notes that those who grow up with prayers read from a book find spontaneous prayers refreshing, whereas those used to unscripted prayers find in written prayers a particular depth and thoughtfulness.

Regarding unanswered prayer, Yancey realizes that it is truly an unanswerable problem. How, for instance, could the prayers of twelve people applying for the same job all be answered? And Yancey wonders whether Jesus' prayer for Peter, that his faith not fail, is to be counted as an unanswered prayer of Jesus himself, since Peter's faith does indeed fail three times. Yancey's very nuanced account of unanswered prayer is truly helpful in working through the problem without trying to solve it.



Inspired by Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), Steven Chase in *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005, 304 pp., \$28.00) calls prayer "the tree of life planted in the soul" (p. 13). Using this metaphor, Chase develops five models of prayer as "a way of life," so that all we do can become a part of prayer. The idea is not that we "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) in the usual sense of saying words to God, but that we become constantly aware of God's presence and thus always immersed in prayer. Chase wants to get beyond the "active" versus

“contemplative” conceptions of prayer (a point to which we will return when we consider Merton).

Chase sees the first model of *prayer as conversation* as analogous to the roots of a tree. Indeed, it is this model that “grounds all prayer in God” (p. 15). Chase reminds us of the startlingly different Latin translation that Erasmus gives of John 1:1. Instead of “in the beginning was the word (*verbum*),” he writes “in the beginning was the conversation (*sermo*),” a translation certainly justified by the many meanings of the Greek word “*logos*” in this verse. In describing what takes place in the conversational prayer, Chase more or less follows a formula—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (ACTS)—though he adds a long section on silence and listening, which is only appropriate if prayer is to be a true *conversation*.

Turning to the second model, *prayer as relationship*, Chase likens this to the solid trunk of a tree. He turns to the subject of *hospitality*, for at the heart of a relationship must be receptivity, kindness, forgiveness, and reconciliation. What results is a friendship that leads to love. Chase points out that this is true even for someone who, like Julian of Norwich (1342-c. 1416), living in solitude establishes a close relationship with God.

Next, if we think of *prayer as a journey*, we immediately think of the branches of a tree. Just as branches grow in all kinds of shapes, sizes, and directions, so it is with this form of prayer. Chase considers various metaphors (journey, wandering, pilgrimage), patterns (linear, purgation, circular, narrative), and types of meditation (on nature, soul, Scripture, God). He concludes that there are many ways to measure our “progress” in prayer.

Turning to *prayer as transformation*, we move to the leaves of the tree. Leaves bud, grow, and then die. We are thus reminded that prayer involves change and that there are seasons of prayer. It is a cycle of life and death, in which death to the self is absolutely essential to produce life.

Finally, Chase sees *prayer as presence* as analogous to the flowers and fruits of a tree. Here centering prayer helps us to sense both the presence of God and our presence to God, what the author calls “the Immanuel quality of prayer” (p. 209). The goal is to open our entire selves to God’s presence. However, this requires moving into a different kind of consciousness in which we are aware of God’s beauty, truth, and goodness.



Richard J. Foster’s *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992, 288 pp, \$23.95) can rightly be called a modern “classic” on prayer. In this comprehensive work Foster covers twenty-one different kinds of prayer, grouped into three spiritual types: movement inward, corresponding to the Son; movement upward, corresponding to the Father; and movement outward, corresponding to the Spirit.

Moving inward, we can practice what Foster calls “simple prayer,” which he claims “is the most common form of prayer in the Bible” (p. 9). So

many of the great biblical figures – Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, John – pray in this way, a form of address without pretense, and that is where Foster suggests we begin. This quite naturally leads us to prayer of the forsaken, for we all experience times of dryness and a sense of being forsaken by God, as well as to the prayer of *examen*, in which we take time to dwell upon the state of our souls. In both moments, we take stock of how we feel, how we perceive ourselves to be connected to God, and our innocence or guilt. Here Foster rightly recommends steering between the extremes of rationalization and flagellation, since it is all too easy to misinterpret ourselves as either exemplary or irredeemable. Quite naturally, we move on to the prayer of relinquishment. It is here that we learn to move from struggling with God's will – trying to turn God toward *our* will – to releasing our will and trusting in God.

As we move upward, we pray the prayer of adoration, which is our most basic way of relating to God. Just as God pours out his love toward us, so we respond in return. Adoration for Foster has two sides: thanksgiving and praise. His point is that in Scripture these attitudes are really interchangeable. "The Prayer of Adoration must be learned," Foster counsels, "It does not come automatically" (p. 87). Perhaps even more difficult is the prayer of rest, in which we come to have a sense of calm in the midst of the storm of life. We can move into such a state by way of solitude, *silencio*, and recollection or focus. From here we move to various types of prayer, culminating in meditation and contemplation. In meditative prayer, we meditate upon Scripture and listen for what God would say to us, and thus the Bible becomes "words of life." In contemplative prayer, we attempt to pray without words. Although we will return to this kind of prayer when we turn to Merton, it is worth noting here that this may well be the most difficult and demanding type of prayer.

In moving outward, Foster first speaks of "praying the ordinary," in which we pray about ordinary experiences and see God in them. Although we experience great triumphs and deep valleys, most of our lives are simply ordinary. Once we have come to grips with God in the ordinary events of our lives, then we can move on to those moments that are other than ordinary. Foster closes his book with what he calls "radical prayer," in which we catch a vision for how the church, society, and each of us *could* be. It is a kind of prophetic prayer that proclaims that the church or the world as we know it must change, a prayer calling for justice to the very least members in society. Perhaps this is the most difficult prayer of all, for we are often unable to see *how* things really could change and are often *unwilling* to call for a change that may upset our status quo. Such prayer is truly *radical*.



Thomas Merton's well respected *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books 1971, 128 pp., \$10.95), which is by far the shortest book in this quar-

tet, has an almost Zen-like quality. (Indeed, the edition listed has an introduction by a Buddhist monk.) Many of its sentences are worthy of long and careful reflection. Merton relies the simple, direct way of prayer of the first monastics, the Desert Christians of the fourth century. This appreciation for simplicity is something that Merton shares with Foster. One Desert Father gives the following advice: "It is not necessary to use many words. Only stretch out your arms and say: Lord, have pity on me as you desire and as you well know how! And if the enemy presses you hard, say: Lord, come to my aid!" (p. 20).

Merton sees the *meditatio* of meditative prayer as closely related to *psalmodia* (singing psalms), *lectio* (spiritual reading), *oratio* (spoken prayers), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). In the unified life of a monk, these activities work together. Similarly, he emphasizes that "the term *mental* prayer is totally misleading in the monastic context," since prayer involves all of one's being (p. 30). Merton's discussion of the distinction between public and private prayer is particularly helpful, for he points out that this is a thoroughly modern problem that depends upon a highly individualized sense of self. As such, it is really just a pseudo-problem, since there can be no hard and fast distinction: when we pray alone, we always pray together. Finally, we must recognize that contemplative prayer is really a way of living and so is strongly connected to action and all that we do. Here Merton and Chase are saying much the same thing, but that is because the monastic tradition has long recognized – centuries before either – that, lived appropriately, life itself is prayer.

As should be clear, each of these books has something to offer. If you have questions about prayer, read Yancey. If you want a systematic way of thinking about prayer, Chase is very helpful. If you want an overview of the many sorts of prayer, Foster is excellent. And Merton is superb in providing deep reflections on prayer. While each of these books can easily be read alone, read together they form a rich tapestry.

NOTE

† Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.14, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 230.



BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

is Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

Editors



ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Director of the Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob holds the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and the B.A. from Georgetown College. You may contact him by phone at 254-710-3774 or e-mail at Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Professor of Art History at Baylor University. With the M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the B.A. from Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons she coedited *Interpreting Christian Art* and coauthored the three volume *Illuminating Luke*. Her current book, *Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence*, will be published this year. You may contact her by phone at 254-710-4548 or e-mail at Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu.



NORMAN WIRZBA

Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Research Professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life at Duke Divinity School. He is the author of *The Paradise of God* and *Living the Sabbath* and editor of *The Essential Agrarian Reader*. You may contact him by phone at 919-660-3400 or e-mail at nwirzba@div.duke.edu.



WILLIAM D. SHIELL

Proclamation Editor

William D. Shiell is Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has served on leading committees of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. After receiving the B.A. in religion from Samford University, he earned the M.Div. in theology from George W. Truett Theological Seminary and Ph.D. in religion from Baylor University. He is the author of *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (2005) and *Sessions with Matthew* (2008). His weekly sermons are published online in audio format at www.fbcknox.org. You may contact him by phone at 865-546-9661 or e-mail at shiell@fbcknox.org.

Contributors

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Founding president of The Transforming Center, Wheaton, IL

BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

BURT L. BURLESON

University Chaplain, Baylor University

TODD EDMONDSON

Senior Minister of Lincoln Trail Christian Church, Irvington, KY

JOHN ESSICK

Assistant Professor of Church History, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

Warren Professor of Catholic Theology, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

STEVEN R. HARMON

Associate Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, AL

D. LESLIE HOLLON

Senior Pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, San Antonio, TX

HEIDI J. HORNIK

Professor of Art History, Baylor University

TREVOR HUDSON

Member of the pastoral team, Northfield Methodist Church, Benoni, South Africa

KURT KAISER

Songwriter and composer, Waco, TX

ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Director, Center for Christian Ethics, and Professor of Philosophy, Baylor University

KEN MASSEY

Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Greensboro, NC

MEROLD WESTPHAL

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Fordham University, Bronx, NY

TERRY W. YORK

Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music, Baylor University