

BESIDE STILL WATERS

50 Daily Prayer Retreats



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BESIDE STILL WATERS



INTRODUCTION

Beside still waters. That sounds wonderful! We long for such a place, such a moment of stillness and peace in our lives. That is what this daily devotional for Lent is about. It is about taking time every day to be still and to open our lives to the presence of a loving God. It is about stepping back a few moments every day from the clutter and clatter to pray. Prayer is, after all, a fulfilling of our most basic, most fundamental need, to be in communion with God.

So, every day during Lent we are going on a short retreat just to be with God. The word “retreat” comes from an old Middle English word meaning, “a strategic withdrawal from battle.” We, thinking strategically here, want to take some steps back from the action to deepen our relationship with God through prayer. As Julian of Norwich observed in the fourteenth century, “Prayer oneth thee to God.”

Significantly, we see in the Gospel of Mark nine times when the very active Lord Jesus goes on short retreats to pray. For example, “*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed*” (Mark 1:35). Amazingly, Jesus came into this world in order to draw us into His very life of eternal communion with the Father.

For a few moments each day of Lent we will set aside the many things we could be doing in order to be with God. We will explore many of the facets of prayer, not just to obtain something from God, but to act in partnership with Him. We will see that prayer is more than petition and pleading; it is our whole relationship with God. Eugene Peterson wisely reminds us, “Prayers are not tools for doing or getting, but for being and becoming.” (*Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*) Seventeenth century Scottish theologian Henry Scougal elegantly wrote:

In prayer we make the nearest approaches to God, and lie open to the influences of heaven; then it is that the Sun of Righteousness doth visit his directest rays, and dissipateth our darkness, and imprinteth his image on our souls. (*The Life of God in the Soul of Man*) And God longs for us to pray to satisfy something in Him. Spending time with Him makes God happy!

In these daily retreats we will take up the Bible as our guide as we best nurture our praying on Scripture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught his students,

“Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to appropriate the Word... According to a word of Scripture we pray for the clarification of our day, for preservation from sin, for growth in sanctification, for faithfulness and strength in our work.” (*Life Together*) So each day we will listen for God in His Word, and speak with Him in response. We encourage you to get a notebook or journal to record some of your conversations with God; what you sense God saying to you and what you want to say to Him.

Each day’s reading begins with a short Scripture reflection followed by a Prayer Retreat with suggested activities. You will pray! Like C. S. Lewis said, “We want to know not how to pray if we were perfect, but how we should pray being as we are now.” (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) Or, as Abbot Chapman counseled in his classic on prayer: “Pray as you can, and do not try to pray as you can’t. Take yourself as you find yourself and start from there.” (*Spiritual Letters*)

There are probably as many different ways of praying as there are people. Each of us has our unique, God-created way of being with Him. We will explore many different ways of praying, some that will feel more comfortable to you than others. If over the course of the coming days you ever find yourself asking, “Am I praying right?” Relax! God will teach you! Come back to those ways of praying that feel right for you; make them a part of your ongoing daily prayer.

Why not decide right now on the place where you want to go on retreat each day? Make it a special place. And when each day do you want to meet with God? Commit yourself to it!

Where you will meet with God: _____

When you will meet with God: _____

As you enter the coming days, know that you are God’s beloved, the apple of His eye. You are surrounded by His love. He will lead you beside still waters!

Prayer is taking time to let
God recreate us, play with us,
touch us as an artist who
is making a sculpture,
a painting, or a piece of
music with our lives.

Don Postema,
Space for God: The Study and Practice of Spirituality and Prayer

Prayer Begins With God



Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion...”

Genesis 1:26a, 27-28a

Prayer begins with God. While we might think that prayer begins with us, it really doesn't. Long before we ever thought about prayer or felt the need to pray, God was first drawing us into prayer. God created us for just this, for intimate communion and fellowship with Him. Know that God longs for you to pray, not only to satisfy something deep within us, but to satisfy something eternally deep within God. That is because God so loves you that He longs for time with you. Any desire you have for prayer right now echoes God's previous and greater desire for you. Your feeling the “want” to pray is God drawing you close.

There are people who think of prayer as a human contrivance by which we try to get God's attention. That makes prayer all up to us. We are left trying to persuade God, to coax Him, bending His ear through repetition, trying to twist His arm. Yet it is God who wants to get our attention, to have us talk and have communion with Him.

On this first day of our prayer retreat it is fitting to begin at the beginning; that is, Genesis. Here on the first page of Scripture we discover God's purpose in creating us for communion with Him: *“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”* Note carefully the plurality of divine Persons as God resolves to create: *“Let us make.”* Here is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit making the astonishing decision to include you and me in the Trinity of love and communion. In this, God gives us full place at the table with the Triune God. Any prayer that we pray flows from God's decision to create us for intimacy, for close relationship with Him.

Christian theology teaches the doctrine of “Prevenient Grace”, meaning that God's grace literally “comes before” us, racing to precede anything that we ever do. God's grace gets into us and starts working in us before we ever do a thing. We love because God first loved us. We seek because we have been sought. We pray because God has “come before” us, moving us and stirring us to prayer.

It is not by accident that you have opened this daily devotional on prayer, or that you want to learn more about prayer. It is the “comes before”,

prevenient grace of God drawing you closer to Him. As you pray today you incarnate the dignity and high calling that is yours by being created in the very image of God. You are made for close relationship with Him. Eugene Peterson observes, “We become what we are called to be by praying.” (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*)

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to reflect on the following:
 - The place I find most helpful for prayer is...
 - The time I find best for prayer is...
 - What I want to say to God now is...

“The single most important piece of advice about prayer is one word: Begin!”
Peter Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*

Entering Into The Love of God



Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion..."

Genesis 1:26a, 27-28a

Howard Hendricks, my beloved seminary professor, frequently talked with us about the importance of prayer. He would often caution: "If you are like me, one area of your spiritual life that is constantly shot down in flames is your prayer life." "Why is that?" Hendricks would ask. Quick came his answer, "It's because the Evil One doesn't mess around on the periphery! He always goes straight for your jugular, that which is most vital for you: your prayer." My professor believed that prayer is as essential to our spiritual health as taking the next breath is to our bodies.

I remember one day when a fellow student went to "Prof Hendricks" for help with prayer. "Dr. Hendricks," the student said, "I really am struggling with prayer. Can you help me?" True to form, Dr. Hendricks gave the student an assignment: "I want you to go home and pray for five minutes without asking God for one thing. It could revolutionize your prayer life, just being with God without asking."

People do often think of prayer simply as a means of getting something from God. In time they come to see that prayer is really about intimacy with the God of heaven and earth. God created us in His image, according to His likeness because He wants intimate relationship with us.

The Bible tells us "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8), and love by definition implies intimate relationship. In an intimate relationship with God we are then seeking, not merely to get something from God, but to be with Him. John Vianney was a French parish priest esteemed for his spiritual counsel and guidance in prayer. He once asked an old peasant farmer what he was doing when late every afternoon he came into the church and sat for awhile. The old man replied: "I look at the Good God and the Good God looks at me." (*Christian Spirituality*, Lawrence Cunningham and Keith Egan) That is communion with God! That is prayer!

Timothy Keller writes in his book *Prayer*: "We can see why a triune God would call us to converse with him, to know and relate to Him. It is because he wants to share the joy he has. Prayer is our way of entering into the

happiness of God himself.”

God created you in His image and passionately desires intimacy with you. Your wanting to pray and to learn about prayer is His presence moving about in you. He wants to share His joy with you!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Follow my professor’s advice and take the next few moments to talk with God; simply be with Him without asking for anything.
- This next week look for an opportunity to talk with someone about prayer as communion, as simply being with God.

“Why do we pray? Out of a sense of need, yes. But this need goes far beyond simply getting help in our troubles, or the satisfaction of our desires. Prayer is the fulfillment of a primal need, the need to be in relationship with God.”

Kenneth Swanson: *Uncommon Prayer*

The Empowering Influence of Prayer



Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion..."

Genesis 1:26a, 27-28a

Timothy Keller, in his book *Prayer*, observes that books on prayer often emphasize prayer either as a means for experiencing God's love and communion, or as a means for calling in God's kingdom. Keller names these two ways of praying "communion centered" and "kingdom centered". He notes that the Bible teaches both.

In today's foundational Biblical text on prayer we observe God creating humanity in His image for both "communion centered" and "kingdom centered" purposes. God created us in His image because He wanted us to enjoy communion with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From communion with God there flows to us delegated authority over His kingdom. God created us to fill the earth, to take charge over all powers opposed to God, and to exercise His authority over the world.

The significance of being created in the image of God is breathtaking and must be read within the context of the ancient Near East where the prevailing images were those of kings. A king customarily erected his image throughout his kingdom to assert his sovereign rule, much like nations today plant their flag. Kings of Babylon, Pharaohs of Egypt and other monarchs set up such images. Old Testament theologian Bruce Waltke unfolds the implications of our being made in the image of God:

As we step out onto the stage of life, we are to understand that the blessed God crowned all of us, not just the kings and priests who rule us, to reign with glory and honor and dignity...God has called humanity to be his vice-regents and high priests on earth...In other words, humankind is created to establish the rule of God on earth. (An Old Testament Theology)

As we commune with God we are empowered by Him for kingdom purposes, to exercise His delegated authority over our world. The psalmist exults in the authority God grants for rule over the earth: *"The heavens are*

*the LORD'S heavens, **but the earth he has given to human beings*** (Psalm 115:16, emphasis added). Prayer is both God's means by which we commune with Him and by which we share in His rule over our world. God bestows on us authority to actually ask for His kingdom to come, and for His will to be done on the earth as it is in heaven.

Within God's sovereign, creative purposes He has chosen to so dignify humanity that there are things He cannot do in the world, but in response to our prayers. Through prayer we live out our identity as creatures made in God's image!

God placed us here to plant the flag of His kingdom, to rule over all the powers opposed to Him. Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft rightly observes: "Prayer is the widest circle of influence we have." (*Prayer: The Great Conversation*) God has created you and empowered you to make things happen through prayer.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Put your "crown" on for a few moments and, as God's king or queen on the earth, talk with God about the places or situations in the world where you want His kingdom to come and His will to be done.
- After you have finished speaking with God sit for a few moments in His presence, enjoying communion with Him. End your time of prayer by praying The Lord's Prayer.

"God receives us just as we are and accepts our prayers just as they are. In the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer."

Richard Foster, *Prayer*

God Seeking Communion With You



They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

Genesis 3:8-9

All of the religions of the world are about humanity seeking after God, trying somehow to reach up to Him. The Bible reveals a radically different vision of God seeking us, moving heaven and earth to connect with us, coming down to us in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. From its first page to its last the Bible shows God making the first move towards us, taking the initiative in our relationship with Him.

Today's Scripture is a portrait of prayer showing God coming down into the Garden for fellowship with His creatures made of dust, made in His divine image. It is a lovely scene where the Creator comes to His creatures *"at the time of the evening breeze."* This was a time of day counted as special in the hot ancient Near East. It is starting to cool and the day's work is done so that it is a time for stillness and relaxed conversation.

This is a story cloaked in mystery and wonder; the form in which the Sovereign Lord appears to Adam and Eve is not revealed. But He does come seeking, wanting communion, longing to spend time with those created in His image for fellowship with Him.

The text hints that God coming down for communion is something He does regularly. He talks and they listen; they talk and He listens. There is mutuality, dialogue, give and take, reciprocity. It is the stuff of life.

On this day God initiates, beginning with a question: *"Where are you?"* It is obvious that the all-knowing, omniscient God is not seeking information as to whereabouts. God knows where Adam and Eve are: they are hiding. But God wants Adam and Eve to know where they are, to name what they are doing. They are the ones hiding, not God.

Today, God comes seeking communion with you, longing to share lives together. And God comes asking: *"Where are you?"*

PRAYER RETREAT

- God is asking you today: “*Where are you?*” There are few questions more important than this one. Where are you in relationship with God today? Where do you see yourself in your journey? Is there a sense in which you are hiding from God, holding back? Have you been avoiding Him? Name where you are.
- Now, imagine Jesus right beside you (He is, you know!). Talk with Him about where you are. Conclude by talking with Jesus about where you would like to be.

“We must lay before Him what is in us,
not what ought to be in us.”

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

Listening to God's Word Through Praying



Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

1 Samuel 3:10

God speaks, and we listen; we speak and God listens. It's an ongoing, running conversation. It's the gist of prayer. But you might wonder: "How is God speaking to me?"

There are countless ways that God speaks to us. We would not limit the many ways in which the infinitely creative God speaks to us, gets our attention, and wants us to respond to Him. God often speaks to me in the starry night, the faithful words of a friend, an illness, holding a baby, the seasons of the year and the seasons of life. He who is the eternal "Word" revealed in the flesh, is always speaking, always longing for us. We grow in prayer as we learn to pay attention to God's speaking.

As Christians we believe that God speaks to us most clearly through His Son and through the revelation of His Son in Scripture. Therefore, all of the great teachers on prayer link prayer to the Bible. "Open the Bible, start reading it, and pause at every verse and turn it into prayer." (John Piper) "Let us nurse our prayer on our study of the Bible." (P. T. Forsyth) "It's the best way to read the Bible: as prayer." (Peter Kreeft) The great George Mueller read the Bible on his knees, ready to translate what he read into prayer.

In 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Nazi Germany from the relative safety of London so he could lead an illegal, underground seminary for the training of pastors. Stealthily he traveled from village to village overseeing the "seminary on the run". Bonhoeffer thought the linking of prayer to Scripture so vital that he required students to devote 30 minutes a day to prayerful reading of Scripture. In the seminary handbook Bonhoeffer spoke of the importance of tying prayer to Scripture:

We have already said that the most promising method of prayer is to allow oneself to be guided by the word of the Scriptures, to pray on the basis of a word of Scripture. In this way we shall not become the victim of our own emptiness. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word... And we are certain that our prayer will be heard, because it is a response to God's Word and promise. (*Life Together*)

I hear multiple complaints about prayer from people: they say they don't

know how to pray; they feel like they're saying the same thing over and over; that it's hard to concentrate; that prayer is boring and nothing seems to happen. But Eugene Peterson reminds us that effective prayer begins with listening to God's Word speaking to us:

Prayer is never the first word. It is always the second word. God has the first word. Prayer is answered speech; it is not primarily 'address' but 'response'... The first word is God's word. Prayer is a human word and is never the first word, never the primary word, never the initiating and shaping word because we are never first, never primary. (*Working the Angles*)

With Samuel of old we say to God: "Speak, for your servant is listening."

PRAYER RETREAT

- What are some ways you have experienced God "speaking" to you recently?
- Now ready yourself to listen for God speaking to you in Scripture. Slowly read Psalm 23 (next page), pausing to turn various lines into prayer. This might mean pausing to thank God for specific times He has acted as your Shepherd. You might ask Him to lead you through a difficult time. You might thank Him for providing what you need, or ask Him to provide for you now. You might talk with Him about some perceived lack in your life. This is conversation with God; let the Spirit of God lead you.

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

*“A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking.
But he became more and more quiet until in the end he
realized that prayer was listening.”
Soren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses**

Prayer Is Habit Forming



Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

Daniel 6:10

Powerful King Darius of Persia decreed that for 30 days prayers could only be addressed to him. Violators of the king's edict would be cast alive into a den of lions. Yet, godly Daniel was not deterred. He persevered in his daily practice of three set times of prayer to the Lord God. Daniel was not alone in his practice of three times a day prayer. Three times of daily prayer were observed by Christ's apostles (Acts; 3:1; 10:3,9; 10:30; 16:25). Early Christians also prayed three times a day (*Didache* 8:3), and during the Middle Ages the church bells called people to prescribed times of prayer.

With our freedom in Christ we can adjust fixed times of prayer to our family situation, life stages and schedule. Yet through the centuries people have discovered for themselves the value of establishing a time for daily prayer. Peter Kreeft observes: "Because 'praying anywhere' can easily become 'praying nowhere', just as 'praying anytime' can easily become 'praying at no time'. Everything in general becomes nothing in particular." (*Prayer: The Great Conversation*) People find that they are sensitized or more aware of God's presence throughout the day when they have set aside a specific time for prayer.

For years I resisted a regular routine of prayer, believing that spontaneous communication with God should be spontaneous and free. As a result I prayed infrequently and with little satisfaction. Eventually I learned that spontaneity often flows from discipline...I found that I needed the discipline of regularity to make possible those exceptional times of free communication with God. (Peter Kreeft, *Prayer: The Great Conversation*)

One of my frequent rationalizations for not having set times for daily prayer is lack of time. I'm too busy! But philosopher Peter Kreeft has helped me see through my excuses. "We have time and prayer backwards. We think time determines prayer, but prayer determines time. We think our lack of time is the cause of our lack of prayer, **but our lack of prayer is the cause**

of our lack of time.” (Peter Kreeft website, emphasis added) I find that Jesus does with time just what He did with the boy’s loaves and fishes. Jesus multiplies, or ‘alters’, whatever we place on His ‘altar’.

When establishing daily time for prayer it’s good to remember: “All who have walked with God have viewed prayer the main business of their lives.” (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*) The habits you form in prayer will ultimately form you.

PRAYER RETREAT

- For the remaining days of Lent you might want to establish a set daily time(s) for prayer:

TIME: Just like you make appointments to meet with people, make an appointment to meet with God each day. You likely will not “find” the time to do this, so you will have to “make” the time. You might think of an activity you could delete in order to make time for daily prayer. You might set your alarm a few minutes early to meet with God. Choose a reasonable amount of time for prayer, like 10 minutes. Consider offering to God your best, that is, your best time of day for prayer.

PLACE: Choose a specific place to pray. If you travel frequently, this might be difficult, but make it a place free of distractions. Soon this set-aside-place will become special to you and will actually enhance a prayerful attitude.

Take a few moments to talk with God about committing to a set time for daily prayer. Ask for His help and for His blessing as you do this.

“There is no bad way to pray and there is no one starting point for prayer. All the great spiritual masters offer only one non-negotiable rule: You have to show up for prayer and you have to show up regularly.”

Ronald Rolheiser, *Prayer: Our Deepest Longing*

What If I Don't Feel Like Praying



Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.
Colossians 4:2

On days when I just don't feel like praying, I often kindle my flickering devotion with the sage words of Samuel Chadwick: "The one concern of the Devil is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayer-less studies, prayer-less work, and prayer-less religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." (*The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*) Chadwick's words fire me up to pray!

I used to let feelings get in the way of praying. I worried about not feeling anything when I prayed. But now I remind myself that feelings are fickle and not always to be trusted. I know that even on days I don't feel anything, God is always there. No matter my mood, God is always there.

C.S. Lewis takes up feelings and prayer in his novel *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis writes as the senior demon Screwtape giving advice to the novice Wormwood on how to tempt humans to sin. Screwtape cautions about the dangers of letting his human subject pray: "Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself [God] we are defeated, but there are ways of preventing them from doing so." Screwtape advocates keeping humans from praying by keeping them preoccupied with their feelings when they pray:

Keep them watching their own minds and trying to produce feelings there by the action of their own wills...Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at that moment.

People often wrote to C.S Lewis for spiritual counsel, like Genia Goelz, who had written concerned about her feelings when praying.

Lewis replied:

Don't bother much about your feelings. When they are humble, loving, brave, give thanks for them: when they are conceited, selfish, cowardly, ask to have them altered. In neither case are they you, but only a thing that happens to you. What matters is your intentions and your behavior. (*Yours Jack: Spiritual Direction* from C. S. Lewis, ed. by Paul Ford)

Every day I perform established needed tasks without thought about what I am feeling. I take out the garbage because I need to. I pay the mortgage

because it needs to be done. I don't give a moment's thought to how I feel about chores and obligations. Doing that need to be done make a difference in our lives. How much more does daily prayer, whether we feel like it or not!

I have a friend who had a brain tumor. Several of us established daily times to drive him to the hospital for his radiation treatments. It was really quite amazing! He would lie on a table for a few moments. He never felt a thing. And yet, something powerful was happening within him. Slowly, imperceptibly, the radiation did its work. And slowly, imperceptibly, God does His amazing work in us as we spend daily time with Him.

PRAYER RETREAT

- In your journal, record your answers to these questions:
 - How do you see your feelings influencing your prayer?
 - What are you feeling about spending time each day in prayer for the season of Lent?
 - What do you want to say to God about your feelings and prayer?

“You may not feel like praying. You might be tired and even bored. But God welcomes you just as you are. Spend a few moments talking with Him. God’s presence is not the same as the feeling of God’s presence and He may be doing most for us when we think He is doing least.”

C. S. Lewis, Yours Jack: Spiritual Direction from C. S. Lewis, ed. by Paul Ford

Letting Go the Worries of 'How' to Pray



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... Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 4:14-16, 7:25

What do you imagine Jesus doing right now?

Scripture tells us that He is praying for us! As you begin to pray today you are joining a prayer meeting already in progress, a 24/7 prayer meeting. Today's Scripture says that Jesus is our "*great high priest*" who "*always lives to make intercession.*"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Christ the Center*, says that we err in praying when we put too much emphasis on "how" and not enough emphasis on "Who". Scottish theologian James Torrance writes about the "Who" who prays for us, as Christ our great high priest:

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus comes to be the Priest of Creation, to do for men what man fails to do...that He might stand in for us in the presence of His Father, when in our failure and bewilderment we don't know how to pray as we ought, and forget to pray. By His Spirit He helps us in our infirmities. ("The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship", *Theological Foundations for Ministry*)

Jesus came down from heaven to draw us into His communion with the Father, lifting us to share in His very life. As our great high priest He right now stands in for us with the Father, taking our feeble, inarticulate prayers into His. We can pray in the name of Jesus because Jesus has first prayed in ours, offering up for us our prayers to the Father.

It is essential in learning to pray that we know when Jesus prays, His Father always hears and answers His prayers: "*Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me*" (John 11:41-42). This does not mean that we do not need to pray. It means that as our high priest, Jesus

takes our prayers and presents them to the Father as His own.

Jesus is the perfect God-Man, who being fully God and fully man can “*sympathize*” with us in our “*weaknesses*”. Jesus truly understands you and what you are experiencing, and offers faithful prayers on your behalf. Therefore, today’s Scripture urges us to “*approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

Let go all your worries about “how” to pray and know “Who” prays for you!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to meditate on today’s Scripture from Hebrews.
- After meditating on this text, record your thoughts in your prayer journal about the following:
 - What does this text say to me today as I pray?
 - What does it mean for me that Christ my great high priest is praying for me?
 - What will it mean for me to approach with boldness “the throne of grace”?

“The basis of true prayer is the Sonship of Jesus which we share in union with him.” P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*

Keeping Our Eyes On Jesus, the 'Who' of Prayer



*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,
a hope that enters the shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus,
a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a
priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*

Hebrews 6:19-20

Gerald Hughes writes in his book, *God of Surprises*: “God alone can teach us to pray. We must not allow particular methods to get in the way. God really is our teacher and he alone can teach us to pray, or rather, he alone prays in us.” Keeping our eyes on the “Who” of prayer rather than the “how” can open new and exciting vistas for us. We see in the New Testament that the “Who” of the life of faith is Christ. Listen to Paul: “*For to me, living is Christ*” (Philippians 1:21); “*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20). Or, listen to Jesus: “*I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you*” (John 14:20); and, “*I am the vine, you are the branches*” (John 15:5).

Seeing Christ as the “Who” of prayer means seeing Him as our High Priest, representing us before God and representing God to us. At this very moment Jesus stands before God for you and me. Jesus’ ministry on our behalf, as our High Priest, is powerfully symbolized in the Old Testament’s typology of the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. On that most high and holy day the high priest symbolically gathered all the sacrifices and prayers of the people and carried them into the Holy of Holies, presenting them to God. There in the presence of God the high priest acted as the representative of all the people, in solidarity with them. His representation of them was symbolized in the names of the twelve tribes emblazoned on his breastplate. When he entered the Holy of Holies God was symbolically receiving all of the people in the high priest.

The New Testament looks at the high priest’s actions on the Day of Atonement as fulfilled in Christ as our High Priest. Christ offered not a sheep or goat as a sacrifice, but He offered up Himself. On our behalf He presented His life of perfect obedience, perfect prayer, and perfect worship. In His ascension He carried us with Him into heaven’s Holy of Holies. Thus, today’s Scripture reveals Christ as “*a forerunner on our behalf*”, standing before God for us. John Calvin rejoices in Christ as the “Who” acting for us:

For the high priest entered the holy of holies, not in his own name only, but also in that of the people, inasmuch as he bare in a manner

the twelve tribes on his breast and on his shoulders...so that in the person of one man all entered into the sanctuary together. Rightly then does the Apostle speak, when he reminds them that our high priest entered into heaven; **for he has not only entered for himself, but also for us.** (*Hebrews*, emphasis added)

Christ acted on your behalf, in your place, in your name, offering to God perfect obedience and perfect prayer. He is your “forerunner” who stands before God in His righteousness and holiness. He authorizes you to pray in His name, because He has first prayed in your name before the Father. “It is the Christ at prayer who lives in us, and we are conduits of the Eternal Intercession.” (P.T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*)

If Christ is the “Who” of our praying, then what is the “how”? The same book of Hebrews tells us the “how”: “*Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*” (Hebrews 12:2). The “how” of prayer is keeping our eyes on Jesus, the “Who” of prayer!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Record in your prayer journal what has been called the “ACTS” of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.
- Now reflect on how Jesus offers to the Father your Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.
- At the conclusion of your prayer thank Jesus for standing before God as your High Priest, empowering you to pray in His name.

“We can only pray ‘in the name of Christ’ because Christ has already, in our name, offered up our desires to God and continues to offer them. In our name, he lived a life agreeable to the will of God, in our name vicariously confessed our sins and submitted to the verdict of guilty for us, and in our name gave thanks to God.” (James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune Grace of God*)

Continuing The Conversation With God



*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate
day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

Psalm 1:1-3

There are few things I enjoy more than talking with a good conversationalist, someone easy to talk to, a good listener who keeps the conversation moving along. God is the supreme conversationalist, par excellence. God is easy to talk to; He always listens and keeps the conversation going. That, in a sense, makes prayer easy. As Tim Keller says in his book on prayer: “Prayer is the continuation of a conversation that God has started.” (*Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*)

Listening to the Word of God for the conversation that God has started gets us going in powerful, effective prayer. The Puritan cleric Thomas Manton prescribed: “What we take in by the Word we digest by meditation and let it out in prayer.” (Quoted by Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*)

If there ever is a Hall of Fame for Great ‘Pray-ers’, then George Mueller will surely be in it. Mueller was a Prussian immigrant in England troubled by the homeless orphans he saw on Bristol’s streets. Mueller’s daily custom was to read the Bible on his knees and start praying. He liked to get on his knees, poised, ready to turn into prayer what he read in God’s Word. Mueller read, meditated, listened for God voice, and as he said, “asked God for great and mighty things.” Mueller said that he wanted to prove to the world that there is a God and that He hears and answers our prayers.

God did answer in such a way that Mueller housed, fed and educated over 10,000 orphans without ever talking to anyone but God about his needs. He literally prayed in the equivalent of millions of dollars for the orphans. Mueller looked to meditation on Scripture to show him how to pray. In his autobiography Mueller told how Scripture guided and fueled his prayers:

Now I saw, that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it... The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord’s blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God;

searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it... The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. (*Autobiography of George Mueller*)

Like many before him and after him, Mueller proved prayer as the continuation of a conversation God has already started in His Word. Meditation on God's Word is essential for powerful praying, proving that God does exist and that He does great and mighty things.

PRAYER RETREAT

- The dictionary defines "to meditate" as: to focus one's thoughts on; to spend time in quiet reflection or pondering. Take a few moments "to meditate" on today's Scripture text, Psalm 1:1-3. Note: the Hebrew word translated "the law of God" is torah. Torah is a word picture of a finger pointing to the right way to go; Torah is best understood as the "instruction" of the Lord.
- After meditating on Psalm 1:1-3, keep the conversation with God going. Talk with Him about your meditation, your thoughts and feelings about the text, or anything else He stirs in you.

"To respond to God in prayer, we must listen to his Word.
This means taking time to meditate on some portion
of the Bible as a bridge to prayer."

Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*

Turning Daily Bible Reading Into Prayer



Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 1:1-3

In George Mueller's remarkable 93 years he housed, fed and educated more than 10,000 orphans, prayed in millions of dollars for their care, preached in 42 countries, and recorded 50,000 specific answers to prayer in his journal. Mueller saw all of this flowing out of daily Bible reading, meditating on it and turning it into prayer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived by a similar outlook, telling his students in the underground seminary that daily meditation on God's Word and prayer would provide "solid ground under our feet." (Peter Frick, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Meditation and Prayer*) Amidst the horrors of Nazi Germany Bonhoeffer advised in the seminary handbook: "There are three things for which the Christian needs a regular time alone during the day: meditation on the Scripture, prayer, and intercession. All three should find a place in the daily period of meditation." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

Whether you are caring for orphans, outwitting the Gestapo, or searching for solid ground under your feet, daily meditation on Scripture and prayer are indispensable. Eugene Peterson cautions that the reason why many prayers are "stagnant and stale" is that they have been "uprooted from the soil of the word of God." (*Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*) Prayer needs to be rooted and nourished in Scripture. "Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

Note carefully the imagery of today's Scripture in which the person meditating on God's Word (or Torah = instruction), is likened to a thirsty tree putting down its roots deep into streams of water. Such a person's life will be genuinely fruitful and will not wither in life's harshness.

In the brutality of Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer instructed his students to put their roots deep down into God's Word. He urged them to "ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise it has something utterly personal to say for us for this day and for our Christian life." (*Life Together*)

God's Word has something personal to say to you for this day. Sink your roots deep down into it! Listen for God's voice! Pray!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to meditate on Hebrews 13:5-6, below. When you have completed your meditation, turn your meditation into a conversation with God.

*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content
with what you have; for he has said,
"I will never leave you or forsake you."
So we can say with confidence,
"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."*

"After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful terms."

Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*

When Prayer Becomes More Than Having Words to Say



*For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock
and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.*

Psalm 62:1-2

I like watching people! We are a fascinating species! I especially enjoy watching a couple on their first date. I sense that things might be going well for the couple when I see conversation back and forth, an easy repartee. One of them serves up a topic and the other returns it without a miss. I get nervous for them when there are long stretches of silence.

If the first date goes well for them and matures into love, the couple will actually enjoy long stretches of silence in their times together. They will cherish riding in a car together and not having to say anything for miles. They will enjoy sitting together in the evening without a word spoken. They will simply enjoy each other's presence.

So it is as we grow and mature in our prayer life with God. Both God and we come to enjoy long stretches of silence, comfortable with being with each other. We relax in the warmth of love. Prayer now becomes more than having words to say. John Calvin believed "the best prayers are sometimes without utterance." (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 20) C. S. Lewis thought wordless prayers to be the best. (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) In Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, the senior demon warns his pupil demon, Wormwood: "Music and silence – how I detest them both."

Ole Hallesby, a Norwegian theologian and pastor, wrote a modern prayer classic in which he talks about the special moments of being silent before God:

There come times, not so seldom with me at last, when I have nothing more to tell God. If I were to continue to pray in word, I would have to repeat what I have already said. At such times it is wonderful to say to God: "May I be in Thy presence Lord? I have nothing more to say to Thee, but I do love to be in Thy presence." (*Prayer*)

Perhaps you have run out of words in your praying, and you just want to be with God. You can, like the psalmist in today's text, sit silently with your God: "*For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.*"

Lectio Divina is an ancient way of Christian prayer that roots our prayers in God's Word while ushering us into restful silence before Him. The four steps

of Lectio Divina are:

READ slowly and thoughtfully a short Scripture passage. Listen for God speaking to you through the words of Scripture. Watch for a word or phrase that stands out to you, that especially speaks to you.

REFLECT or meditate on what you have just read, paying special attention to that word or phrase that spoke to you. Allow God to speak to you in your meditation on His Word.

RESPOND or talk with God about the thoughts and feelings arising from your meditation. Make this a real dialogue with God as you talk with Him and listen for His word to you.

REST or let yourself just be silent with God. You don't have to say anything or do anything. Experience the "rest" that Jesus promises to those who follow Him. The old monks called this "lap time with God" as we just let ourselves be with Him. No words needed here, no effort, no trying to please, or trying to make something happen. Just let yourself be with God!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Using the four steps of Lectio Divina (READ, REFLECT, RESPOND, AND REST), pray Psalm 46:1-3, 1:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though
the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar
and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult... "Be still,
and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am
exalted in the earth."*

"Precisely because the Lord is present with us, we can relax and let go of everything, for in his presence nothing really matters, nothing is of importance except attending to him."

Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*

Truth Sharing With God Through Prayer



*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?*

Habakkuk 1:2

Think for a moment about the couple we talked about yesterday who were on their first date. I hoped for an easy conversation between them, good repartee, without anxious, nervous bouts of silence. They likely wanted to make a good first impression, to put their best foot forward. But if there are to be any future dates, any likelihood for a genuine relationship, they will eventually have to stop trying to make a good impression. They will have to get real; put away the masks and stop pretending to be something they are not.

We will discover that the same is true for a maturing, intimate prayer relationship with God. We will have to stop pretending to be something we are not. We will have to let down the masks and get real with Him. C. S. Lewis frankly advised an inquirer about prayer: "We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) We grow in prayer as we learn to present to God our true self and not our false self.

If that couple on their first date were to later come to me for pre-marital counseling, I would have them make a list of subjects they avoid in talking with each other. That is because I have learned that the things we avoid talking about, usually lead to conflict in the relationship. So it is with God and our relationship with Him. We need to talk with Him about the 'elephants' in the room, the things we avoid telling Him. God wants honesty and truth in our relationship. C. S. Lewis said, "The prayer preceding all prayers is 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.'" (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*)

Ann and Barry Ulanov in their book *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* advise the reader:

In prayer we say who we are. Not who we should be. Not who we wish we were. But who we are... With no secrets we come at God crudely, like beggars or greedy children. It is no good denying this or trying to mask it. We must see the crudeness and include it. God loves us in the flesh. Denying what God loves and died for is trying to go God one better, and only impedes our prayers. We must bring to God the crudeness too.

The psalmists set a good example for being honest and real in prayer. Consider the following: *“I pour out my complaint before him”* (Psalm 142:2). *“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”* (Psalm 13:1a). *“You have caused my companions to shun me”* (Psalm 88:8a). *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Psalm 22:1a). *“Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?”* (Psalm 74:11).

In today’s Scripture the prophet Habakkuk let God know that he is not happy with the Almighty. It appears to him that God is doing nothing about the widespread violence and injustice in the land. Habakkuk’s complaint then leads to honest dialogue between the Lord and Habakkuk in which God reveals one of the Scripture’s greatest truths: *“the righteous live by their faith”* (Habakkuk 2:4). The Lord replies in essence: *“I hear you, Habakkuk, I hear your complaint. I’m asking you to trust me. The righteous live by their faith in me.”*

To mature in our relationship with God, we have to be honest and real with God as He is always honest and real with us. So just be you. Tell God the truth and He will tell you the truth. In the process you will find yourself transformed.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Think for a few moments of some subject you have been reluctant to bring up with God. Perhaps it is a sin with which you struggle. Maybe it is unacknowledged anger with God or another.
- Write down in your prayer journal what it is that you have been avoiding with God. Tell God about your desire to be honest and real with Him.
- Now sit for a few moments and rest silently before God. Conclude by praying The Lord’s Prayer.

“All this stuff – ordered, unordered, disordered – is what we must bring in a big sack and dump out and sort through and talk over with God.”

Ann and Barry Ulanov, *“Prayer and Personality”*, in *The Study of Spirituality*

Standing in The Personal Need of Prayer



Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Philippians 4:6

I often talk with people hesitant to ask God for something, reluctant to pray for themselves. While they pray for others, they think it selfish and less than spiritual to ask for themselves. This reluctance is not something we find in the Bible.

Jesus readily encourages us to ask: *“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you”* (Matthew 7:7). The Hebrew and Greek words most often translated as “prayer” in the Bible mean “to petition” or “to ask”. The nineteenth century “Prince of Preachers”, Charles Spurgeon, had it right: *“Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom.”* (*Spurgeon on Prayer*, ed. Charles Chadwick) Jesus’ little brother, James, who must have heard Jesus pray countless times, says: *“You do not have, because you do not ask”* (James 4:2b). There are some things we will never have from God if we do not ask. Augustine taught, *“God does not ask us to tell him our needs that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.”* (Quoted by Mark Gibbard, *Prayer and Contemplation*)

Being a parent has taught me quite a lot about prayer. As a father I know how eager I am for my children to come to me and ask. If they need help, I want them to tell me! If they need something, I want to know! They don’t have to have just the right words, or know how to say it. So too our Lord Jesus points to our heavenly Father’s eagerness to hear and answer:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

I often think of the importance of asking from God for ourselves when I am flying. You have probably heard the flight attendant give the pre-flight safety instructions: *“In case there is loss in cabin pressure, oxygen masks will deploy from the ceiling...Please make sure to secure your own masks before assisting others.”* This applies to prayer. If we do not pray about our own spiritual, physical and emotional health, we’re not likely to be able to care for

others. It's as the old African-American spiritual goes: "Not by brother nor my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer."

So don't be hesitant, don't be timid about asking. Rather, *"by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

PRAYER RETREAT

- Identify what you might be worried or anxious about today and record it in your journal. Take that anxiety and translate it into prayer, making your requests to God.
- Today's Scripture asks that we present our requests to God "with thanksgiving". Take a moment to thank God for how He will answer your prayer.

"It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

Intercessory Prayer: Shifting Our Center of Gravity



First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:1-3

“First of all” today’s Scripture commands us to pray! That speaks priority, that one thing we do before we do other things. We offer up to God our “*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving*” for all people. This is our holy calling as believer-priests conferred with the honor of going before Heaven’s throne on behalf of others (1 Peter 2:5, 9). We call this intercession (from *inter-* “between” = *cedere* “go”). We literally take up the privileged position of “going between” God and others. Richard Foster says: “When we move from petition to intercession we are shifting our center of gravity from our own needs to the needs and concerns of others.” (*Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*)

When we pray for others God is expressing through us the wideness of His love for the world. To pray for others in the privacy of our quiet place is one of our most generous, self-forgetful acts of love. With the Old Testament prophet Samuel we would say: “*Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you*” (1 Samuel 12:23). Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the community must enter every day.” (*Life Together*)

After I have prayed for my family and friends it is easy for me to stop praying. So I like to follow the guideline for prayer found in *The Book of Common Prayer*; intercession is to be offered up for:

The Universal Church, its members, and its mission;
The Nation and all in authority;
The welfare of the world;
The concerns of the local community;
Those who suffer and those in any trouble.

Today’s Scripture says this kind of prayer for everyone “*is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour.*”

PRAYER RETREAT

- Pray in one of the two following ways:

Offer up intercessory prayer using the guideline from *The Book of Common Prayer* (see above).

OR

Think of three persons for whom you want to pray. One, a loved one; one, a person you know about; lastly, a person who has hurt or offended you. See each person held by God in His loving arms. Ponder how Christ died for each of these persons. Know God's purpose to reconcile the world to Himself in Christ Jesus. Offer up each of these three persons to God. After spoken prayer, rest for a while as the Holy Spirit "*intercedes with sighs too deep for words*" (Romans 8:26b).

"God creates something He can create in no other way than through intercessory prayer."
Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

The Joy And Freedom of Confessional Prayer



If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:8-9

A garbage truck comes by our house every Monday to haul away our week's garbage. So early on Monday mornings I gather all the garbage of the week and take it to the curb for the garbage truck to take away. Similarly, we need Jesus to regularly take away the garbage that we take to the 'curb' in prayer. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. reminds us: "Recalling and confessing sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough." (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*) I find it something in my life I have to deal with routinely.

Dealing with our garbage begins with acknowledging our sin or confessing it, and taking it to Jesus. Today's Scripture emphasizes that none of us can ever say that we don't have sin that needs to be dealt with "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" So we need to get used to thinking of today, and every day, as garbage day: a day to search out and acknowledge sin and take it to Jesus. God's promise is: "*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

The word "*confess*" translates the Greek homologeō (homo = "same" + logeō = "speak"), that means, "to say the same thing" or "to agree with" When we confess sin we are agreeing with God's estimation of it; it is sin, and we are also agreeing that Christ faithfully takes away that sin. It is because of what Christ accomplished on the cross that God is "*faithful and just*" in forgiving our sin. God forgives us because the debt is paid, and not because we have vowed to God to do better or to make amends.

Many people find the following prayer to be helpful in taking a daily inventory and dealing with sin in their lives. I hope you do also.

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen. (*The Book of Common Prayer*)

Acknowledging our sin and taking it to Jesus is a joyful and freeing moment in prayer, because we know that Jesus completely takes it away! *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

PRAYER RETREAT

- Today, where do you sense a failure to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself? (Matthew 22:37-39) Talk with God about your failure and confess it to Him as sin.
- Now take a few moments to confess, or “to agree” with God that Jesus completely removes that sin. Then thank God for your full and complete forgiveness.

“It is wrong, then, to conceive of confession as an arduous process of self-purgation. The freeness of our forgiveness in Christ corrects that mistake. Yet it is just as wrong to take forgiveness lightly and to forget the cost of how it was obtained.”
Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*

Taking Jesus Seriously in Prayer



They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Mark 10:46-52

"What do you want me to do for you?" That might strike you as a strange question for Jesus to ask a blind beggar crying out for help. Isn't it obvious what anyone in this man's sandals would want? And yet, Jesus wants the needy man to articulate it, to name his desire and to speak it. Andrew Murray, in his book on prayer *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, speaks to our need to identify and to name what it is we want Jesus to do for us:

The cry had reached the ear of the Lord. He knew what the man wanted, and was ready to grant it to him. But before He did it, He asked him, "What wilt thou that I should do for you?" He wants to hear from his own lips, not only the general petition for mercy, but the distinct expression of what his desire was. Until he speaks it out, he is not healed.

Socrates said that generalities are the refuge of a weak mind, but they are also the refuge of weak praying. I often err in asking God to bless me, or others, without specifically naming the blessing desired. What is it that I want for myself or for others? How do we ever thank God for His answers if we have not specifically asked?

I like to imagine Jesus beginning every morning asking me: "What do you want me to do for you today?" Jesus is pleased when we take Him seriously, asking Him specifically for what we need from Him.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Read again today's Scripture employing as many senses as you can. Set the scene. Is it warm, cool, windy, rainy? What does the crowd look like? Who are they? What are the street sounds?
- Now imagine Jesus calling for you, like the blind beggar, to be brought to Him. How do you feel about Jesus wanting to hear what you want to say? Imagine Jesus looking into your eyes and asking: "What do you want me to do for you?" You want many things, but what is it that you most want from Jesus? Identify it! Tell Him!
- You may not today receive what you are asking, but keep asking. If you are asking for something that is wrong for you, Jesus will let you know. Listen for Him!

"What a lot of praying there is that prays for everything
in general and nothing in particular."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon Gems*



“I Believe; Help My Unbelief!”

Jesus said to him, “If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Mark 9:23-24

“I believe; help my unbelief!” That is one of my favorite and most often prayed prayers. “Lord, I do believe, but help my unbelief!”

You can feel this poor father’s helplessness, his hopelessness. He can’t find anyone to help him. His little child has an evil spirit that convulses him, flings him to the ground foaming, grinding his teeth, body rigid. Sometimes the demonic spirit hurls him into the fire or water trying to destroy him.

Desperation drives the father to Jesus’ disciples for help. But they can’t help. He then turns to Jesus pleading: *“Help us if you are able!”* Jesus assures the father, *“All things can be done for the one who believes.”* His faith already shaken, the father prays: *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* And his son is healed!

Out of all the prayers I have ever heard, there are few that strike me as so honest and so articulate as this father’s daring prayer: *“I believe; help my unbelief!”* Just enough faith to know that he needs to pray, but not enough faith to even believe in an answer. That’s often where I find myself, and perhaps where you are today.

Ole Hallebsy, whom I mentioned on an earlier day, was a Norwegian theologian and pastor, an outspoken opponent of the Nazi occupation of Norway. For his stance against the Nazis he spent two years in a concentration camp. Even after the war Hallesby faced hostility for his commitment to the Biblical orthodox faith. He knew the feelings of helplessness in prayer. In his book, *Prayer*, Hallesby writes about helplessness as the very foundation of prayer:

My friend, your helplessness is the very essence of prayer. To pray is to open the door unto Jesus and admit Him into your distress. Your helplessness is the very thing which opens wide the door unto Him and gives Him access to all your needs.

Hallesby says he had learned that prayer consists of essentially two things: the recognition of our helplessness and just enough faith to take that helplessness to Jesus. “Leave to Him the when and the how of His answer to your prayer.” (Hallesy, *Prayer*)

PRAYER RETREAT

- Where in your life are you feeling helpless? You might want to record this in your prayer journal.
- Now take this feeling of helplessness to Jesus and talk with Him about it. You might even want to say to Jesus: *“I believe; help my unbelief!”*
- Complete your prayer time by being still and silent in God’s presence, listening for Him.

“We have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties.”
Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Praying to Our Father



He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father...”

Luke 11::1-2a

It is striking that Jesus’ disciples are asking Him to teach them to pray. They had likely learned at their mothers’ knees how to pray. They would have learned it in their village synagogues known as the beit tefilah, “the house of prayer”. As pious first century Jews their lives would have been immersed in prayer from the time they opened their eyes in the morning till they chanted the Shema at bedtime (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). They literally had learned prescribed prayers and blessings for every occurrence of the day. Some of Jesus disciples had previously followed John the Baptist and would have been taught about prayer by him (John 1:35-42).

Yet they perceive something in the way Jesus prays that makes them eager to learn from Him how to pray. They are not asking Him how to perform miracles, how to walk on water, or how to raise the dead. They want Him to teach them about something they discern as paramount: *“Lord, teach us to pray.”*

Astonishingly, Jesus answers: *“When you pray, say, Father...”* With these heaven-shaking words Jesus introduces all of His followers to the secret of Christian prayer. He grants to us the authority to call His Father our Father. We get to talk to the heavenly Father, just like Jesus talks to Him. In the same familial, intimate way as Jesus talks to His Father, so we get to talk to Him too. We address the sovereign God of heaven and earth as “Father”.

Over the years we have perhaps grown accustomed to calling God, “Father”, but never before had people dared to address God as “Father”. (see Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*). But because of Jesus, and only because of Jesus, we are granted the unimaginable privilege of talking to God in a whole new way. As our “Elder Brother” (Romans 8:29), Jesus hands down to us the advantage that was eternally His. We can stand before God with the confidence that we stand before Him as Jesus stands before Him. What’s more, the Holy Spirit, *“the Spirit of the Son”*, is urging us, prompting us, to boldly cry out to Almighty God: *“Abba! Father!”* (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to reflect on what it means for you to be able to pray to God as your Father.
- Reflect on Jesus giving to you the authority to stand before the Father just as Jesus stands before the Father.
- Now ask the Holy Spirit to give you greater boldness and urgency in going to Abba Father.
- Finally, talk to your Abba Father about anything that is on your heart! Be bold, be unafraid!

“My identity as Abba’s child is not an abstraction or a tap dance into religiosity. It is the core truth of my existence.”

Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*

Hanging Out and Sharing With God



I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

John 15:15

It is because the love and care of friends has meant so much to me through the years that I am captured by today's Scripture in which Jesus says: "*I have called you friends.*" He then adds that He calls His followers friends, "*because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*" For Jesus it seems that being a friend means holding nothing back, not keeping secrets. Jesus thinks of friends as being open and real with each other.

Life shows us that friendships grow as friends are honest with each other, neither one pretending nor wearing a mask. Most of us have experienced how sharing a confidence with a friend builds our confidence in that friend. Our mutual trust grows. Similarly, as our friendship with God grows we let down the mask; we get honest and real with Him.

Veteran spiritual director William Barry notes a relationship between frank, open conversation among friends, and frank, open prayer with God:

Prayer is a rather simple thing when you get down to it. It's just two friends hanging out with each other, sharing thoughts and feelings, asking and giving forgiveness, asking and giving advice. Prayer is what happens when two friends are together and are aware of each other's presence. (*Praying the Truth*)

Telling God honestly what we are thinking or feeling isn't telling God something that He doesn't already know. But rather than giving God information, we are actually giving Him trust. We are trusting Him with those things most intimate and personal to us. We don't have to pull any punches with Him. Just as we feel trusted when a friend reveals something secret and personal, so God feels trusted when we open up to Him.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to be still and relax in God's presence.
- Now think of something you have avoided taking up with God. Is there a disappointment you have with God? Is there a sin that you are not ready to let go? Are there bad feelings towards another person or towards your church? Is there something that happened years ago that you have avoided bringing to God?
- Talk with Abba Father honestly and openly about these things.
- After you have talked with God, take a few moments as friends just to sit quietly with each other. Listen for what you sense God might be saying to you in these still moments.

“If you don't tell God what you are concerned about, your relationship will become more and more formal and, to be frank boring...If we don't take the chance of being honest, we won't really grow in friendship with God or with anyone else.”

William Barry, *Praying the Truth*

God and Me: Getting to Make Things Happen



Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:26-28

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk and author of more than 70 books on prayer and Christian spirituality. Yet, in one of his books about prayer Merton concedes: “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners all of our life.” (*Contemplative Prayer*)

While we might think that we can master prayer, we will always be novices in the grand mystery of intimacy with the infinite God. We ought not to be surprised when, like the apostle Paul in today’s Scripture, we must admit: “*we do not know how to pray as we ought.*”

We often find ourselves tangled up in situations in which we do not know how to pray. We honestly do not know what is best for us or for others. It feels like our best prayers miss the mark. Yet no sooner does the apostle Paul acknowledge that he struggles with how to pray does he say that the Holy Spirit sides with us and “*intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*” When it feels like our prayers fizzle, “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness.*”

Note closely the word “helps” in the text, as it translates the Greek sunantilambanomai, a vivid word picture composed of the following parts:

sun = “together with”

anti = “facing”

lambanomai = “to help”

Put these different parts of the word “helps” together, and it’s a picture of the Holy Spirit “**together with**” us, “**facing**” us, “**helping**” us carry a too heavy load. The Spirit picks up the other end of our load and “*intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*” Perhaps today you do not know how to pray; the Holy Spirit does! And the Holy Spirit prays with and for you.

While there are many things we do not know, we do know this as we pray: “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*”

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “God instituted prayer in order to lend to His creatures the dignity of causality.” (*Pensees*) The omnipotent God of the universe crowns us with dignity, making us “*co-workers*” together with Him (1 Corinthians 3:9). Through prayer we get to make things happen with Him.

When Lloyd Ogilvie was Chaplain of the United States Senate he said that he went about his work there with the motto: “Without God, we can’t, without us, He won’t.” (Lloyd Ogilvie, *The Red Ember in the White Ash*) Your prayers are powerful as the Holy Spirit joins His prayers with yours!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Think of some problems that you have had with prayer. Then talk with God frankly about those problems.
- Now meditate on these lines from today’s Scripture taken from The Message:

“God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in us and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans” (Romans 8:26-27).

- Knowing that the Holy Spirit is praying with you and for you, talk with God about whatever is on your heart today.

“We must begin to believe that God, in the mystery of prayer, has entrusted us with a force that can move the Heavenly world, and can bring its power down to earth.”

Andrew Murray (Quoted by Damion Clarke, *Living in the Heart of Prayer*)

Abandoning Ourselves to God in Every Moment



The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God”...Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:35, 38

Perhaps there are times when you feel like Mary must have felt when God interrupted her life. She had her plans for the way her life was supposed to be. There were plans for a wedding, marrying Joseph, having children, a white picket fence, and living happily ever after. But then it happened! God had plans of His own, bigger plans, miraculous plans, mysterious, wondrous, and yes, frightening plans. Implausibly, a teenage virgin girl will carry within her the God whom heaven cannot contain. But all generations call Mary “blessed” for praying to God, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*

Most of us have struggled with saying, “Yes!” to the Great Interrupter when His plans for us don’t agree with ours. God’s interruptions might come as a two o’clock in the morning phone call; a doctor’s frightening prognosis; life alone without the one most dear to us. It’s so difficult to be like Mary and pray: “Here I am, your servant.”

When the plans of the Grand Interrupter crash headlong into mine, I am helped by the wisdom of Jean Pierre de Caussaude. His letters of spiritual counsel have been passed down to us in two powerful volumes, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, and, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*. These two books contain wisdom about how this moment of your life, even the interruptions, come to you as a holy sacrament from God. You can “abandon” yourself to God in this moment. You can receive from God what comes to you moment by moment, the only moment in your control.

You may not always know God’s will for you in the bigger picture, but you can never doubt His will for you in this moment. Imagine what you would give for a clear, definite leading in God’s will for you! Here it is in this moment! Stay close to God as this moment passes into the next and the next...

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to reflect on Caussade’s counsel:

God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment.... The events of each moment are stamped with the will of God... we find all that is necessary in the present moment. If we have abandoned ourselves to God, there is only one rule for us: the duty of the present moment. (*The Sacrament of the Present Moment*)

The present moment is from God and self-abandonment to it is the path to holiness. We need to train ourselves to approach each present task or suffering as a sacrament in the same loving concentration with which we receive the blessed sacrament. (*The Sacrament of the Present Moment*)

The present moment is like an ambassador announcing the policy of God, and the heart declares “‘Thy will be done.’... Oh God, you have allowed this to be... I make you a sacrifice of this difficulty and all its consequences.” (*Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*)

- Where do you sense that you want to “abandon” yourself to God in this present moment?
- Pray now like Mary: “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. Let it be with me according to your word.*”

“As a fact we are always in touch with God; every thing that happens is His arrangement, His Providence, and a means of grace, a push on to Heaven.”

Abbot Chapman, *Spiritual Letters*

I Am Will To Be Made Willing

*For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you
both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Philippians 2:13

Sometimes when I pray there pops up in my mind's eye the image of someone I need to forgive, or to ask for forgiveness. Then I realize that I really don't want to forgive that person, or to seek forgiveness. That's when it feels like all of the air goes out of my prayer. I feel stuck, unable to move forward. Then there are the times I pray and sense God calling me to do something, but I realize I don't want to do it. What are we to do with those moments in prayer when we feel God's will colliding head-on with ours? Do we even keep on praying? Do we think of something else to do?

I am learning that such times of resistance to God while praying is actually God calling us to yet deeper, more intimate and honest prayer. These moments can be like those in dark Gethsemane when Jesus also struggled with God's will for Him. God does not leave us to our own resources when we do not want to forgive, or do not want to do what He calls us to do.

In today's Scripture the apostle Paul says that the want, the desire, the eagerness to do God's will comes from God. Paul reminds that it is God who is *"at work"* in us *"both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

This was the promise of God's New Covenant to put His law within us and write it on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). It is because God works within us that Jesus could command us to do impossible things like loving our enemies and not worrying about tomorrow. We look to God to give us the *"want"* as He transforms us into new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

God works within us to want to desire His will and do it; He tenderly waits for our permission. There is a simple prayer I like to pray when God calls me to do something I don't want to do: **"Lord, I am willing that you make me willing."** I ask God to make me willing to forgive those who hurt me, to make me willing to follow Him in new places of faith and obedience. I can't, but He can.

Corrie ten Boom survived the horrors of the Holocaust and afterwards traveled the world as God's agent of good news and reconciliation. She talked about her need to pray often: "God, make me willing to be willing." (*Tramp for the Lord*) She told God that He would have to make her willing to forgive the monstrous guards at the Ravensbrück concentration camp. And God did! She told God that He would have to make her willing to tell God's good news

of forgiveness and love. And God did!

Perhaps today as you pray, you find that you are not willing to do what God is asking you to do. God can work with that! Keep on praying. Keep on talking with Him. Keep on asking God to make you willing!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Spend some time in prayerful reflection, probing places you might not be willing to do what you know God wants you to do. It might be forgiving someone. It might be a step of faith and obedience. Name first to yourself and then to God what you are not willing to do. (This is real, honest prayer!)
- Now dare to take the momentous step of saying to God: "I am willing that you make me willing." Be prepared to have to pray this prayer again tomorrow.
- Conclude with The Lord's Prayer.

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me."*

King David, Psalm 51:10

The Link Between Thanking and Thinking



*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast
love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Psalm 100:4-5

Repeatedly, Scripture calls us to enter God's presence with thanksgiving and praise Him for who He is and what He does. Yet, as we give thanks to God we mysteriously discover that it is we who are blessed. God does not need our thanks, but knows that we are enriched and strengthened as we give thanks to Him. So the Bible does command: *"give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you"* (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

It is meaningful that our word "thank" and our word "think" come from the same old root word. Methinks there is great wisdom here! Our forbearers knew that when we stop to "thank" God we are better able to "think". And, when we stop to "think" we cannot help but "thank" God.

The apostle Paul saw the link between "thanking" and "thinking" when he wrote to the Romans: *"For though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened"* (Romans 1:21). In other words, when we don't give thanks to God, our thinking about Him and all of life gets distorted. G. K. Chesterton shrewdly observed: *"I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."* (*A Short History of England*)

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom writes about the power of giving thanks in all things. It happened to Corrie and her sister Betsie as they were in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Betsie had prayed that God would show them how to endure the torment of lice. Then excitedly Betsie told Corrie: *"God has already shown us what to do about the lice! God gave us the answer in our Bible study this morning. It was there in First Thessalonians: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus."*

So, in sheer faith Betsie and Corrie gave thanks for all their circumstances in the filthy Barracks 28: the foul air, the suffocating press of people, and yes, even the lice. It was only later they discovered the reason why camp guards left them undisturbed for their daily Bible study: the guards did not want to enter their barracks because of the lice.

Betsie was right. Give thanks to God in all circumstances. Enter His presence with thanks and praise!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to thank God for specific blessings in your life. If you like, record these thank yous in your prayer journal.
- Now think of something for which you might find it difficult to thank God (like Betsie thanking God for the lice). Talk to God about this and your difficulty in thanking Him for it.

“Thou hast given so much to me,
Give one thing more, -- a grateful heart...
Not thankful when it pleaseth me,
As if Thy blessings had spare days,
But such a heart whose pulse may be Thy praise.”
George Herbert, Poem *“Gratefulness”*

God Taking on Our Spiritual Sweet Tooth



Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off for ever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

Psalm 44:23-25

I have what John of the Cross would have called a “spiritual sweet tooth”. (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*) What I mean is, I crave the spiritual equivalents of cheesecake, dark chocolate, and banana cream pie. But fortunately, I have a heavenly Father who knows that I need more servings of broccoli, spinach, and steel-cut oats. He knows that my faith needs more than just the mountaintop highs of ecstasy and delight.

So in God’s providence He allows moments like the psalmist experiences in today’s psalm: that God has forgotten and forsaken him. It is important to note in this psalm that these feelings do not come from any sin in the psalmist’s life. Rather, a few verses earlier he pleads his innocence: *“All of this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant... yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness”* (Psalm 44:17,19).

The psalmist says that he feels covered with “*deep darkness*”. He is likely talking about what John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul” (*Dark Night of the Soul*), and Teresa of Avila “the dry well”. (*The Interior Castle*) It can be difficult for us to know what to do with such feelings of darkness and dryness when we pray. But the fact is that God is taking on our spiritual sweet tooth, our preference for sweet moments of light and spiritual highs. Abbot Chapman, spiritual counselor, wrote to a questioner struggling with darkness and dryness in prayer:

Try to serve God for His own sake, as He wishes you to, and not for His gifts. What does it matter whether you enjoy your prayer or are unhappy in it? What does it matter if you have all those feelings of having no Faith? (You know quite well that you have Faith; for if you had none, you would not mind having none; but pain is caused by your “feeling as if” you had not any.)...Do not think too much about yourself, or that it matters much whether you feel dry or consoled; whether you can or cannot pray, etc. For you know that it does not really matter. But it does matter, very much, that you should take what comes from God with thankfulness and simplicity. (*Spiritual Letters*)

Similarly, A. W. Tozer advised people experiencing dryness in prayer “to ignore it or to tell God about it without any sense of guilt.” (“How to Keep from Going Stale”, *Alliance Witness*, May 17, 1961)

The effectiveness and reach of your prayers must never be measured by any of your feelings about them. Your faith in God’s goodness and faithfulness will grow as He weans you from too much spiritual candy and sugar.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Do you think you might have a spiritual sweet tooth? If so, how do you experience it?
- What do you sense God might be saying to you in those moments when you don’t feel like praying.
- Now, whether you feel like it or not, pray. Be honest with God and tell Him if you don’t feel like praying.

“Let us enjoy light and consolation when it is his pleasure to give them to us, but let us not attach ourselves to his gifts, but to him. When he plunges us into the dark night of pure faith, let us still press on through agonizing darkness.”

François Fénelon, *Talking with God*

Make Satan Tremble



I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:17-23

My seminary professor Howard Hendricks used to warn us about the subtlety of Satan saying, “He never messes around with the trivial, but goes straight for the crucial: our prayer life.” Hendricks said that Satan had no qualms about Bible study, as long as we were not praying. Nor does Satan quaver when we talk to people about Jesus, as long as we are not praying. Hendricks would have agreed with the old hymnodist William Cowper: “Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon their knees.”

In today’s Scripture the apostle Paul prays for Christians to know “*the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.*” Notice that Paul does not pray that God would give us power, but that we might know the power that is already in us. Paul explains that this power is the very power that raised Jesus from the dead, enthroned Him at God’s right hand, and made Him head over all things “*for the church*”.

Note: it is “*for the church*” that God made Christ head over all things. “There is given to the Church, and for the Church’s benefit, a Head who is also Head over all things. The Church has authority and power to overcome all opposition because her Leader and Head is Lord of all.” (Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*)

God’s power works in us as we might pray in His powerful name. Peter Kreeft writes about this power:

I strongly suspect that if we saw all the difference even the tiniest of our prayers to God make, and all the people those little prayers were destined to affect, and all the consequences of those effects down

through the centuries, we would be so paralyzed with awe at the power of prayer that we would be unable to get up off our knees for the rest of our lives. (Angels and Demons: *What Do We Really Know About Them?*)

Do not be surprised that Satan attacks your praying. He trembles at the “immeasurable greatness” of God’s power at work in you.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to pray the prayer of the apostle Paul --- not that you would have more power --- but that you might know the power of God that is already at work in you.
- Reflect on Christ enthroned at God’s right hand above all “authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...”
- Now pray in whatever way you sense the Holy Spirit leading you today.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20-21

God Turning Our Prayer Into Action



And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Revelation 8:2-5

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then today's Scripture provides a picture worth millions. It's a heavenly picture of what your prayers set in motion. In this, John is reporting back to earth things revealed to him before the throne of God. John's images are extraordinary as we see in picture form our prayers rising up to God.

John's first century readers are hard-pressed, suffering saints in the Roman Province of Asia Minor. They face danger from within and danger from without. It must have seemed to them that the score was Lions: 100, and Christians: 0. With no political, economic, or military power they must have felt helpless before the world. The only thing left was prayer.

John pulls back the celestial curtain to show what happens when God's people pray. John's imagery is compelling. Amidst the upheavals of history and unnoticed by world rulers, he shows the prayers of God's people rising up before the throne, returning to earth in unimaginable power.

John tells of seeing seven angels standing before God's throne being given seven trumpets. We've seen these trumpets before in Scripture, symbolizing God ready to act and to intervene in the world (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). As the prayers go up before the throne, an angel sprinkles incense on them from a golden censer. The prayers are a sweet, precious savor to God (Psalm 141:2; Exodus 30:8; Luke 1:10).

Then, as the prayers are received by God, He is ready to put them into action. The same golden censer that was used to sprinkle incense is now used to throw the fire of cleansing to the earth. New Testament theologian Eugene Borning describes this transcendent scene: "The prayers are 'heard'; they have an effect. The effect is not merely a subjective release in the worshiper; the prayers of the saints on earth cause things to happen on earth." (*Revelation*)

This picture around the throne of God shows that our prayers do indeed have effect in this world. They ascend to God as a sweet smelling fragrance, and they descend onto the earth in powerful action. It is little wonder that Jesus says that we “*need to pray always and not to lose heart*” (Luke 18:1).

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take some moments to reflect on today’s Scripture about the prayers of God’s people going up to Him as a sweet smelling fragrance.
- Use your senses to put you into the scene: **see** the luminous brightness around God’s throne; **hear** the trumpets blast; **smell** the sweet incense; **feel** the heat radiating from the fire on the altar.
- Conclude by praying The Lord’s Prayer.

“What are the real master-powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayers of the saints and the fire of God... Would to God we in Christ’s Church really understood the power of prayer like that!”

Thomas Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*

Resting Silently in God's Presence



*But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him!*

Habakkuk 2:20

Be silent before the Lord God!

Zephaniah 1:7a

Yes, Scripture does command us to come before God with praise and thanksgiving, but Scripture also commands us to be silent before Him. There are times we find that words are not enough. They are always not big enough to express ourselves to God. There are times we want to be silent before Him. There are “divine spiritualities that cannot be expressed.” (A. W. Tozer, *Faith Beyond Reason*) There is a place for wordless prayer. Even the man so eloquent in words, C. S. Lewis, thought, “Prayer without words is best.” (*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*) John Calvin said, “The best prayers are sometimes unspoken.” (Institutes III, XX)

English Preacher George Whitefield was a clergyman whose powerful preaching in Colonial America helped ignite the Great Awakening. He often prayed without words, posting in his journal:

God was pleased to pour into my soul a great spirit of supplication, and a sense of His free, distinguishing mercies so filled me with love, humility, and joy and holy confusion that I could at last only pour out my heart before Him in awful silence. I was so full that I could not speak well. (Arnold Dallimore, *The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival*)

From the time of that Great Awakening there comes the testimony of David Brainerd, early missionary to Native Americans, who cherished wordless prayer: “I knew not what to say to my God, but only lean on His bosom, as it were.” (*The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, edited by Jonathan Edwards)

Because prayer is first an attitude of heart, we can express ourselves to God without words. God does not need words to read our hearts. Like Saint Augustine you can simply present yourself to Him: “Here is my heart O God; here it is with all its secrets.” (*Confessions*) You can move beyond the distraction of trying to find the right words. You do not always have to know what to say to God. He knows!

I remember the first time that I realized I didn't have anything more to say to God, but yet longed to still be with Him. So I asked if I could stay and rest silently in His presence. I have come to think that Richard Foster was right: "How desperately we in the modern world need this wordless baptism! Progress in intimacy with God means progress towards silence." (Richard Foster, *"Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home"*)

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to meditate on David's reverie in Psalm 139:1-2, 4:

*"O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away...
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.*

- God knows you completely and loves you completely; He longs to be with you. Like Augustine you can say: "Here is my heart O God; here it is with all its secrets." Now allow yourself just to be with God.
- At the end of your silent, wordless time with God, pray the Lord's Prayer.

"We open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing --- closer than consciousness itself."

Thomas Keating, *Centering Prayer*

Asking for the Wrong Reasons



*You do not have, because you do not ask.
You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly,
in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*

James 4:2b-3

It's just like Huck Finn to go and raise some irritating theological issues in Mark Twain's book about him. In Twain's novel we see Miss Watson lecturing Huck that if he would pray every day he would get what he asked for. Huck tries what Miss Watson tells him, but says that his prayers didn't work. He prayed for a fish line, but didn't get any hooks with it. So he prayed three or four times for the hooks, but got nothing. This led Huck to theologize about prayer:

"If a body can get anything he prays for, why don't Deacon Wynn get back the money he lost on pork? Why don't the widow get back the silver snuffbox that was stole? Why don't Miss Watson fat up a bit? No, I says to myself, there ain't nothin' to it."

Huck is far from alone in having questions about prayer and why prayer might not seem to work.

Some of the best thinking about prayer comes from James, the writer of today's text. He was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus and leader in the Jerusalem Church (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*) He was known as such a man of prayer that early Christians dubbed him "Camel Knees" from spending so many hours in prayer. (*Hegesippus, Fragments, and Jerome, On Illustrious Men*) James' dedication to prayer is obvious from the space he devotes to it in his letter: (1:2-8; 4:1-10; 5:13-20).

James gets right to his point in today's Scripture, saying that God does give what we ask for; so if we have not received what we have asked, we have asked for the wrong reasons. One might wonder if James remembers when the mother of John and another James asked Jesus if her sons could sit at His right and left hand in His kingdom (Matthew 20:20-23). Jesus answers that she is asking for the wrong reasons, and does not understand the consequences of what she asks.

François Fénelon, a French spiritual writer, looks at Jesus' response to this grandiose request and applies it to us:

He does not become angry with us as we might expect. He understands us, advises us of our mistakes and tells us how we should pray. That is what the Spirit of prayer undertakes to do every time we misuse prayer and ask for things for ourselves, for our own enjoyment. Lovingly and kindly, but firmly, He reminds us that this is not in accordance with the true meaning of prayer. He shows us that is to pray amiss, and points out our mistakes. (*Talking with God*)

As God's children we pray expectantly that Abba Father does hear and answer our prayers. Little by little the Holy Spirit teaches us the true meaning of prayer and how to pray.

PRAYER RETREAT

- In 2 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul repeatedly asks God to remove his painful "thorn in the flesh". When God does not answer Paul's request, He then explains why and leads Paul into yet deeper understanding of His grace. God said to Paul: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Take some moments to reflect on something for which you have asked God, and He has not answered. Ask God to teach you what He wants you to know about your unanswered prayer.

"Do not be timid about praying wrongly if you pray humbly."
Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*

Counting Blessings, Not Sheep



*By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night
his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.*

Psalm 42:8

In his poem “Acquainted with the Night”, Robert Frost writes a spiritual noir about his long association with the darkness and anguish of the night. In Scripture the psalmists also tells of tired hands reaching out to God in the night (Psalm 77:2), and beds soaked with tears (Psalm 6:6).

I too have an acquaintance with the night. I have wrestled my pillow at three in the morning, agitated, grieved and awfulizing about life. When I was a hospital chaplain I saw how the night was often the most terrifying for patients and their families.

Yet the psalmists show how they transformed the night into an oratory of prayer. They fight the darkness by rising in the night to praise God (Psalm 119:62). They substitute worrying on their beds with meditating on God’s Word (Psalm 1:2), His character and promises (Psalm 63:5-7). They count their blessings instead of counting sheep. The psalmists come to find the silence and solitude of the night an integral part of their spiritual lives.

The psalmists have taught me some critical lessons about the night and about prayer. When my wife Melodee was dying from cancer, I, like the psalmists, quieted my soul praying God’s Word. Now, when my head hits the pillow, I like to go over verses I have memorized, then talk to God about them. When I wake in the night I will frequently speak the Apostles Creed against the darkness and pray The Lord’s Prayer. If sleep evades me, I like to go over each phrase of The Lord’s Prayer making it personal to my situation. More frequently now I go over my past day with God, talking to Him about conversations, sights enjoyed, problems encountered and happenings in my family. I think God enjoys me praying to Him like that.

Occasionally I like to rise with the psalmist at night to look at God’s night sky and praise Him for His power and glory. Now I can actually welcome those nights when sleep is difficult and enjoy quiet prayer with God. Through prayer I am becoming better acquainted with my old friend, the Night.

PRAYER RETREAT

- When visiting Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello, a guide showed us the great man's bedroom. He told us how each night before Jefferson went to bed he primed his mind by reading something "morally uplifting". During the night Jefferson liked to meditate on what he had read.

Tonight, before you go to bed, set aside extra minutes for reading some Scripture or a devotional. Ready yourself to meditate on it talk with God about it during the night!

*"I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night
also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me."*

David, Psalm 16:7-8a

Walking and Praying; Praying and Walking



But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah 29:7

I first went Prayer Walking when I was ministering in India. Before we would minister in a village, we walked through the village praying for it. When I returned to America I thought Prayer Walking was something needed in my neighborhood. I found my prayers strengthened as I walked near places and persons for whom I was praying. I like to walk and I like to pray: Prayer Walking brings them together for me.

Donald Whitney is a teacher and writer on Christian spirituality who commends Prayer Walking:

The walking and the weather invigorate my sluggish soul. Looking up into the blue or out to the horizon refreshes my sense of the greatness of God. The sights, smells, and sounds of my Father's world surround me with reminders of His presence. The cadence of my pace or stopping occasionally to stare into the distance, often enables me to concentrate in prayer more easily than when I'm still and my eyes are closed.

Here are some suggestions for Prayer Walking:

1. Begin your Prayer Walking by asking the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to what He wants you to see as you walk and pray.
2. Greet people you meet along the way, silently praying a blessing for them. As children of God we are commanded and empowered to speak blessing on others (Matthew 5:43-44; 1 Peter 3:9).
3. Pray for neighbors as you pass their homes; the ones who you know are sick, unemployed, living alone, going through divorce, etc.
4. Keep your senses alert to sights, sounds, and scents you encounter in God's wondrous creation. Watch for those birds and flowers, reminders of God's care for the lowliest (Matthew 6:26-30). Talk with God about what you see.
5. Pray for any school, church or playground you pass as you walk.

Be prepared for God to teach you as you walk and pray. He will enlarge your awareness and concern for the people and world around you.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Go Prayer Walking today or one day this week. If you already walk for exercise or recreation, incorporate prayer into it. If you are not walking regularly, how about going for a walk for the sole purpose of praying? Also, consider taking a friend with you so that you can walk and pray together.

*“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers,
intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.”*

I Timothy 2:1

Palms Down / Palms Up



Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you.

Psalm 55:22a

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:7

It was a simple, hand-lettered sign I saw in a merchant's shop that got me thinking. The sign asked mischievously: "Why pray when you can worry?" I read and thought about the many times I did choose worry over prayer.

But I have learned a way of praying that now helps me make prayer my default mode instead of worry. I learned it at a conference with Richard Foster. It's called Palms Down/Palms Up. Richard Foster describes this way of praying in his book *Celebration of Discipline*. Here's how you can pray Palms Down/Palms Up:

1. Begin by placing the palms of your hands downward as an expression to God of your desire to give Him any worry, fear, problem, guilt that you carry. Inwardly you pray: "Lord, I turn over to you my worry about my doctor's appointment today. I let go into your faithful hands my fear about not having enough money to pay this month's bills. I release to you my anger at Robert." Whatever weighs on your mind release it to God. Feel it gone from your hands.
2. After a few moments of letting go into God's hands, turn your palms up to express your desire to receive from the Lord. You might inwardly pray something like: "Lord, I receive from you your peace about my doctor's appointment." "I receive from you your love for Robert." "I receive from you whatever I need today."
3. Then, having stilled yourself before God, take a few moments just to be with Him. Let God love you and be with you.

You will find that you can pray Palms Down/Palms Up in bed at night, sitting in the doctor's office, waiting in line at the bank, or sitting in church. You can make it your default mode instead of worry. Cast all your burdens and worry on God! He cares for you!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Following the three steps above, pray Palms Down/Palms Up.
- Think of a friend you could tell about praying Palms Down/Palms Up.

“I cast all my cares upon You,
I lay all of my burdens down at Your feet.
And any time I don’t know what to do,
I will cast all my cares upon You.”
Kelly Willard, *“Cares Chorus”*

Collecting Our Scattered Thoughts



*Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth
by your great power and by your outstretched arm!
Nothing is too hard for you.
Jeremiah 32:17*

Abraham Lincoln might have spoken for many of us when he said, “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go.” Perhaps you have faced quandaries where you felt so overwhelmed that you dropped to your knees. I am reminded of a sign I once saw, stating its message “When life gives you more than you can stand, KNEEL!”

In today’s Scripture the prophet Jeremiah is a political prisoner (Jeremiah 32:2-3) when the armies of Babylon surrounded Jerusalem and threatened his people with annihilation (Jeremiah 32:3-5). It was in such an overwhelming predicament that Jeremiah modeled praying in desperate straits.

Jeremiah begins his prayer with His eyes on God rather than the problems. He calls to mind that God’s creation of the universe is ample evidence that nothing is too difficult for Him: *“Nothing is too hard for you.”*

That nothing is too hard for our God is a theme of Scripture. When the teenaged Mary was faced with the impossibility of giving birth to the Son of God, the angel Gabriel assured her: *“For nothing will be impossible with God (Luke 1:37).* When Jesus’ disciples doubted his power to redeem the unredeemable, He reminded them: *“For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).*

Again, Ole Hallesby comes to mind as a person convinced that nothing was too hard for God. He was a pastor and theologian in Norway during World War II, an outspoken opponent of the Nazis who imprisoned him for two years at the Grini (Norway) concentration camp. After the war he faced condemnation from many religious leaders for his commitment to Biblical orthodoxy. He knew a lot about prayer in desperate circumstances! In his book, *Prayer*, Hallesby said that one of the most common mistakes people make in praying is thinking they must help God in their praying. Hallesby writes:

But this has never been God's intention. We are to pray. God Himself will take care of the hearing and the fulfillment. He needs no help from us for that... The Spirit of prayer would teach us that we should disregard the question as to whether the fulfillment of our prayer is hard or easy for God. What we think or do not think about this, has no bearing on the hearing and answering of prayer.

After all, nothing is too hard for God!

Many churches begin their worship with a prayer called a "collect". As the name implies, its purpose is to "collect" all the thoughts and prayers of the people. We too need to "collect" all our scattered thoughts as we pray in order to remind ourselves of the God for whom nothing is too hard.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a moment to "collect" your thoughts and reflect on how nothing is too hard or impossible for God. Repeat with Jeremiah: *"Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you."*
- Think about a difficult or an impossible situation that you face. What do you sense the Spirit of God saying to you about this situation? Talk to God about your difficult or impossible situation.
- After you finish talking with God, take a few moments to be still in His presence, listening for Him.

"We tend to use prayer as a last resort, but God wants it to be our first line of defense. We pray when there's nothing else we can do, but God wants us to pray before we do anything at all."

Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Out of the Mouths of Babes and Infants



*O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of
babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

Psalm 8:1-2

Today's Scripture comes from a psalm in which David prayerfully meditates on the majesty of God displayed throughout the earth. David sees the majesty of God gloriously displayed in the heavens, "*the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established*" (8:3). But greater is the glory David sees in God using "*the mouths of babes and infants*" to establish His dominion over the earth. In this David has much to teach us about prayer.

Old Testament theologian Bruce Waltke points out that the phrase "*babes and infants*" occurs seven times in the Old Testament. Each time the phrase "refers to the helpless offspring of a people threatened with annihilation by a ruthless foe (1 Samuel 15:3; 22:19; Psalm 8:2; Jeremiah 44:7; Lamentations 1:16; 4:4; Joel 2:16)." (Bruce Waltke and James Houston, *The Psalms As Christian Worship*) Waltke comments on the significance of "babes and infants":

It is an apt metaphor for ancient Israel who, trapped as a small and insignificant state between the giant superpowers of Egypt and Mesopotamia, found strength in their dependence upon God. It is also apt for the church which, in a world armed with military and political power, also conquers by faith. Luther rightly interpreted babes and sucklings as a figure to describe the kingdom of God's unique character of humility. (*The Psalms As Christian Worship*)

We take, then, the speech coming "Out of the mouths of babes and infants" as the prayers of God's humble, beleaguered people. As today's psalm states, God shows Himself yet more glorious in using their prayers to silence His enemies. John Calvin adds this commentary on the prayers of God's humble people:

The faithful prayer and praise of God's people --- not necessarily their eloquence --- commences God's work of slaying the foe. What majesty accrues to God when he brings onto the field of battle the poor in spirit against the arrogant hordes of wickedness in order to slay their intolerable pride in the dust. (*Commentary on Hebrews*)

Godly John Knox is famous for his impassioned prayer for God's kingdom to come in Scotland: "Give me Scotland, or I die." In the face of such bold prayer, Mary Queen of Scots is reputed to have said: "I fear the prayers of John Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe." Out of the mouths of babes and infants! Amazing! What power we wield when we humbly pray!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to meditate on God's majesty displayed in the heavens.
- Now take some time to meditate on God's greater majesty displayed in using the prayers and praise of His people. How might this influence your thoughts about prayer in today's world?
- Conclude by praying The Lord's Prayer.

"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*

Wrestling in Prayers for Others



Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

Colossians 4:12-13

I think that my seminary professor Howard Hendricks talked so much about prayer because he had witnessed the power of prayer. He told us about a time when he served a church in Dallas that was desperate to find someone to teach a class of junior high boys. Sadly, the list of prospective teachers had been narrowed down to just one man. When Hendricks was told about that man, he said, "You've got to be kidding! Not him!" But Hendricks said that he could not have been more wrong. That man took the class of junior high boys and transformed it.

Hendricks was so impressed with what he saw happening in the lives of those junior high boys that he invited the man to lunch. Hendricks wanted to learn his secret. The man pulled out a little black book. On each page of the book was a picture of one of the boys, his name, and comments like, "Having trouble with math," or "He comes to church without his parents." The man explained to Hendricks, "I pray over these names every day, and I can hardly wait to see the boys on Sunday and see what God has done in their lives." Hendricks wanted us students to know that when we pray for others and for God's will in their lives, we will be amazed watching God work!

That faithful teacher of junior high boys was like Epaphras in today's Scripture. Epaphras was a prisoner for Christ in Rome alongside the apostle Paul. Paul loved Epaphras as "*a servant of Christ Jesus*", and tells how he worked hard in praying for his fellow Christians in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Paul described Epaphras to them as "*always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf.*" He must have had quite a prayer list to pray for all his friends in those three cities. Paul says that Epaphras' prayer for them was that they "*stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills.*"

Once as I was preparing a funeral for a woman, her son gave to me the woman's Bible full of verses underlined, notes jotted in margins, and clippings placed between pages. I was humbled to discover, when in paging through her Bible, I saw my name on the list of people she prayed for daily. I had to wonder at how her prayers had blessed and influenced me.

The Bible commands, *“Pray for one another”* (James 5:16a). One of the greatest gifts you can give to other people is to pray for them. Few things are more Christ-like than praying for them. And in praying for them you will find your love for them growing. You will begin to see them more and more as God sees them.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to reflect on people you know who have prayed for you. Express thanks to God for them and for their prayers. If any of these people are still living, give them your thanks.
- Write down the names of some people for whom you want to pray on a regular basis, maybe daily or at least weekly.
- Some people find it helpful to assign different categories of people to different days of the week. For instance, on SUNDAYS you pray for your pastor, church leaders, and other churches. On MONDAYS you pray for government, the president, congress, courts, governor, mayor, etc. Continue with categories for the remaining days of the week.
- Now pray for the people on today’s list. You might want to make comments alongside their names regarding how you sense God wanting you to pray.

“True intercession involves bringing the person, or the circumstance that seems to be crashing in on you, before God, until you are changed by His attitude toward that person or circumstance...

People describe intercession by saying, ‘It is putting yourself in someone else’s place.’ That is not true! Intercession is putting yourself in God’s place; it is having His mind and His perspective.”

Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Wherever Two or Three Are Gathered



*All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer,
together with certain women, including
Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers*
Acts 1:14

I am an introvert who enjoys my times of solitude and personal prayer, but one day I was challenged by Jesus' special, promised presence with the "two or three" gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20). I realized that it is not enough just to pray alone. So today I seek not only to be disciplined in personal prayer, but also to be disciplined in praying with others.

The importance of praying with others was reinforced for me in a study I did of prayer in the book of Acts. I wanted to better understand how the first Christians prayed with such power. I was surprised at what I discovered. In looking at every time the word prayer was used in the book of Acts, I found that people most often prayed with others. I then started looking at the New Testament in a fresh way, seeing that there are more commands about praying together than praying individually. Christian educator Gene Getz writes about the lack of emphasis our Western culture places on praying with others:

Because of our philosophy of life, we are used to the personal pronouns "I" and "my" and "me." We have not been taught to think in terms of "we" and "our" and "us." Consequently, we individualize many references to corporate experience in the New Testament, thus often emphasizing personal prayer... Don't misunderstand. Both are intricately related. But the personal dimensions of Christianity are difficult to maintain and practice consistently unless they grow out of a proper corporate experience on a regular basis. (*Praying for One Another*)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned his students, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone." (*Life Together*) I think that Bonhoeffer would have included in that warning our need for both private prayer and praying with others. "Let him who is not praying alone beware of praying with others. Let him who is not praying with others beware of praying alone." Praying alone and praying with others are not opposites, but are mutually reinforcing. And by praying alone we are readied for praying with others.

Jesus taught His disciples: “Pray then in this way: **Our** Father in heaven... Give **us** this day **our** daily bread...” (Matthew 6:9,11). The pronouns here are plural; Jesus assumed they would gather for prayer as they sought to follow Him.

The first Christians learned about prayer by praying with others, and found themselves emboldened by the presence of others. Know that you too can be blessed and can experience Jesus’ special presence wherever two or three gather in His name.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Think of a person, or perhaps two, with whom you would like to pray. While it is preferable to meet and pray together in person, some people meet and pray over the phone, or Skype, or FaceTime.
- Take a few moments to pray about talking with that person or persons about meeting for prayer.
- Now that you have talked with God about this, talk to the person or persons with whom you would like to pray. Talk with them about:
 - When you will meet
 - Where or how you will meet (in person, phone, Skype, FaceTime)
 - How long you will meet each time
 - How many times will you meet
 - What you will pray about

“Through the years I have found other people indispensable to my growth in praying. They have helped me see glimmers of God’s presence I would have overlooked when left to my own devices...Sometimes they have simply stood by me when I knew I should pray but didn’t feel like it.”

Eugene Peterson, *The Art of Prayer*

Ready for Prayer: Any Time, Any Place



Pray without ceasing
1 Thessalonians 5:17

Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, considers the importance of and concludes, “All who have walked with God have viewed prayer as the main business of their lives. For those explorers in the frontier of faith, prayer was no little habit tacked on the periphery of their lives; it was their lives.” For prayer to be the “main focus” of our lives we have to grapple with Scripture’s command to “pray without ceasing”. How do we do that? How do we deal with dirty diapers and pray? How do we handle an angry customer and pray? How do we concentrate on completing our taxes and pray?

Much has been written through the centuries on what it means to pray without ceasing. I find it helpful to consider an ancient papyrus letter written in the days of the apostles that uses this adverb “without ceasing” (Greek: *adialeiptos*), to mean “incessant cough”. It’s the kind of winter cough I get that I can’t stifle in church or a quiet movie theater. It’s the cough that seems to come out of nowhere in the middle of the night. It can happen any time, any place. I’m finding that a good way to “*pray without ceasing*” is to be ready for prayer any time, any place. I think of these kinds of prayers as “Abiding Prayers”; we practice abiding in Christ without ceasing. They have come to mean so much to me whether waiting in the TSA line, readying myself for sleep, or responding to a troubled friend.

I choose to take my Abiding Prayers straight from Scripture; I know they will be pleasing to God and will line up my thinking with His. Here are some Abiding Prayers I have ready to repeat for any time, any place:

- **“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”** (Based on the prayer of the boy Samuel, 1 Samuel 3:10)
- **“You are in me, and I am in You.”** (Based on Jesus’ words to His followers, John 14:20)
- **“Here I am Lord.”** (A prayer of presence and availability based on the prophet’s Isaiah’s prayer, Isaiah 6:8)
- **“When I am afraid I trust in You.”** (based on David’s prayer, Psalm 56:3)
- **“Come, Lord Jesus.”** (The last prayer of the Bible, Revelation 22:20, and the believer’s fervent prayer for Christ to come in this moment and Christ to come at the end of the age)

- **“Abba, I belong to you.”** (Brennan Manning’s prayer based on Romans 8:15)

The repetition of any of these prayers is not the *“heaping up of empty phrases”* that Jesus warns about in Matthew 6:7. First, these are words of Scripture and not empty phrases. Jesus says that pagans heap up empty phrases thinking that God will hear them *“because of their many words.”* Rather, we repeat these words of Scripture to help us abide in Christ any time, any place!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to still yourself in God’s presence. Then choose one of the Abiding Prayers from above and repeat it prayerfully again and again.
- Look for opportunities through the coming day and night – any time, any place – to repeat your Abiding Prayer.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through Scripture in order to give you your own Abiding Prayer.

“Thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling, you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and united: it develops feeling toward God and is engrafted with it.”
Theophane the Recluse (Quoted in *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, compiled by Igumen Chariton of Valamo)

Expressing Prayer Through Body Language



*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a
living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.*

Romans 12:1

Page through your Bible and you will see different postures of prayer. You will see bowing (Exodus 34:8), kneeling (2 Chronicles 6:13), face to the ground (Nehemiah 8:6), hands lifted (Psalm 141:2), eyes lifted (John 11:41), sitting (2 Samuel 7:18), and more. Prayer does not require certain physical postures; we see Jesus praying suspended from a cross and Jonah praying squeezed in the belly of a great fish. And yet, physical positions do give expression to our feelings and thoughts. Tie my hands behind me and I'd have a difficult time talking. Communication specialists talk about all that is communicated in body language.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, says that body posture does influence our praying "since we are bodily 'animal' creatures, our desires and aspirations find expression in bodily form... So also the posture we adopt in prayer is an outward and visible expression of our real (and not just inward!) need for God."

While we might think we "have" bodies, we actually are "bodies". In today's Scripture the apostle Paul appeals to believers to present their "bodies" to God as an act of "spiritual worship". "Yet we sit here with our souls tucked away in this marvelous luggage, most insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*)

As we seek to grow in prayer, it is essential to recognize that "Classical Christian spirituality has paid close attention to the disposition of the body in prayer... bodily comportment for prayer is always significant." (Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels*) Our bodies do express and embody our praying. We don't just think our prayers, but can express our prayers with our bodies. Thus, this is the reason for the different postures of prayer in the Bible, and why sometimes we feel compelled to different postures. Theologian Craig Dykstra reminds us, "...you can know things on your knees that you can't know sitting down." (Quoted by Teresa A. Blythe in *50 Ways to Pray*)

Different body postures accompany our prayers, but sometimes they are

prayers in and of themselves. Often our thoughts and feelings cannot be fully expressed in words, so our bodies speak them. That's why we want to stand and place a hand on our heart for the National Anthem, or why a man traditionally kneels to propose marriage.

The most common prayer posture in the Old and New Testaments is standing with eyes looking upward, arms raised, with hands open (Luke 9:28-32; John 17:1). Ancient Jews called this posture the *Amidah* ("standing prayer"); early Christians knew it as the *Orans* posture. This kind of standing prayer is seen on catacomb wall drawings in Rome. Christianity's first theologians and Church Fathers recommended this position for praying. The revered Church council that gave us the Nicene Creed also stated: "It seems good to the holy Synod that prayer be made to God standing." (Canon 20)

Just as we usually stand to express respect for another person, so we stand to express our reverence and awe of God. And as we stand, we raise open hands and open eyes towards heaven, expressing our desire to receive. It's a powerful way of embodying our prayers and a favorite posture of prayer for God's people. We are "standing" in the need of prayer!

PRAYER RETREAT

- As you pray today, stand and raise open hands toward heaven as you look expectantly to your Father.
- Conclude your standing prayer with The Lord's Prayer.
- Take a few moments to reflect on what it was like for you to pray in this position.

"The physical activity symbolizes an engagement
of the whole being in the act of praying."
(*"Prayer"*, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed.
Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III)

When Life Gives You More Than You Can Stand, KNEEL!



Then He {Jesus} withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed.

Luke 22:41

I will always remember the night my father was rushed to the hospital having had a heart attack and placed in intensive care. When I returned home that night I got down on my knees to pray for my dad. I usually prayed sitting in a chair or lying on my bed. But that didn't feel the right way to pray that night. I felt compelled to fall on my knees.

As a hospital and prison chaplain I sometimes saw people praying for the first time and feeling the need to pray on their knees. The posture seemed almost a prayer in itself. Our Lord Jesus in the darkness of Gethsemane also got down on His knees to pray. To get down on our knees seems something almost inborn and intuitive for expressing urgency as we pray. English theologian David Peterson describes the force of praying on our knees:

Whatever the situation it was a recognition of total dependence of one party on another for the provision of some need...Sometimes it was associated with an outburst of praise, but sometimes the gesture itself appears to have been sufficient to express the trust and gratitude of those concerned. (*Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*)

The first Christian martyr, Stephen, fell on his knees talking with God as he was dying (Acts 7:60). Peter knelt beside the dead body of Tabitha, asking God to raise her back to life (Acts 9:40). Paul fell to his knees praying as he said his final goodbye to the Ephesian Christians (Acts 20:36). Kneeling as we pray is expressive body language and the embodiment of surrender to God. In kneeling we go down into the very dust from which we were created, acknowledging our total reliance on our Creator and Redeemer.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Kneel as you pray today.
- Conclude your prayer with The Lord's Prayer.
- Take a few moments to reflect on what it was like for you to kneel in prayer.

“If your knees knock together, kneel on them.”
This appeared on a sign in front of a London church during World War II, when the bombing was intense.

Lying Down to Pray



*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth
praises you with joyful lips when I think of you
on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.*

Psalm 63:5-6

Most of us spend quite a lot of our lives lying down, hopefully seven to eight hours of every night. That makes lying down an opportune posture for prayer. I think I have done some of my best praying between the hours of two and three in the morning lying down in bed. There are grandchildren to pray for, a nation to pray for, and my friend on chemotherapy. And, of course, there are always blessings to count! The quiet and solitude of the night provides a wondrous house of prayer.

It is significant that in the Bible the posture of lying down is symbolic of knowing that one is cared for by God. The Lord is our Good Shepherd so that His sheep can say, *“He makes me lie down in green pastures”* (Psalm 23:2). *“The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up, it is impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met... a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravations and hunger... And the same is true of people.”* (Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*)

Lying down is expressive body language for peaceful rest. David the shepherd-psalmist affirmed: *“I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety”* (Psalm 4:8). In today’s passage David tells how he likes to talk with God and listen for God as he lies on his bed at night. The ancient Israelites ate their Passover meal, not sitting or standing, but lying down as an expression of God delivering them from bondage into rest.

Just as we can stand and pray to express our reverential awe of God, and we can kneel and pray to express our humble surrender, so we can lie down and pray to bodily express our restful reliance on God’s care.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Lie down to express the rest you have in God as He watches over and cares for you. Take a few moments to fully relax in God's presence. Reflect on what it feels like just to rest and let go the burdens of the day.
- Talk to God, ending with The Lord's Prayer.
- Tonight as you lie on your bed, take a few moments to rest in God and entrust yourself to the Shepherd's care.

*"Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD,
where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called,
'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!'"*

1 Samuel 3: 3b-4

First Thing in the Morning



*O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.*

Psalm 5:3

Benjamin Franklin, in his autobiography, tells how he likes to begin each day: “Rise, wash, and address *Powerful Goodness*; contrive day’s business and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study; breakfast.” Like most accomplished people, Franklin knew the importance of how he began the day. How we start our day influences how we live the rest of the day.

James Clear, a popular author who writes on behavior psychology and performance improvement, says: “Let’s talk about the only productivity strategy you’ll ever need... No need to draw this out. This productivity strategy is straightforward: Do the most important thing first each day.” (*“The Only Productivity Tip You’ll Ever Need”*, The Huffington Post)

The psalmist David was clear on what was the most important thing to do first every day: pray! This man after God’s own heart had his priorities in right order. The giant slayer knew the importance of beginning his day with God. And he began his days pretty early: *“Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn”* (Psalm 57:8). Our Lord Jesus was also an early riser who liked to begin His day with prayer: *“In the morning, while it was still dark, he got up went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed”* (Mark 1:35).

From David’s rough and rugged life he had learned his need for God as he began every day. “The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists of shoving it all back, in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Just as different people will have different ways to begin their day, so different people will have different ways to pray first thing in the morning. I like to think through the coming day with God and talk to Him about:

- The things that I’m worried about in the day ahead
- What I want to accomplish in the day
- What I know to be true about God, His character and promises

However you choose to begin your day with God, what you are in effect saying is: “Lord, my relationship with you is the most important thing in my life!”

PRAYER RETREAT

- Many people have been helped in beginning their day by the very popular book, *The Five Minute Journal: A Happier You in 5 Minutes a Day*, by Alex Ikonn. Though not written from a specifically Christian stance, I find it stimulating in my faith life. In the book the author suggests taking a few moments to journal your thoughts about:
 - I am grateful for (three things).....
 - What would make today great...
 - Daily Affirmations...
- In your prayer this morning, talk with God about:
 - I am grateful for (three things)...
 - What God and I could do today to make today great...
 - Daily Affirmations, or, what I take in this day knowing to be true about God and about my relationship with Him.

“All my life I have risen regularly at four o’clock and have gone into the woods and talked with God. There He gives me my orders for the day...after my morning’s talk with God I go into my laboratory and begin to carry out His wishes for the day.”
(George Washington Carver, *The Man Who Talks with the Flowers: The Life Story of Dr. George Washington Carver*, Glenn Clark)

Releasing My Rights to Even the Score



Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses.

Mark 11:25

Once as I was starting to pray, I suddenly realized that I could go no further. I was stuck. The Holy Spirit had pulled the emergency brake to stop me. I realized that I was holding a grudge against someone. I had refused to let go the wrong I felt he had done. In a word, I had not forgiven him, as God had forgiven me.

We cannot explore the subject of prayer without also exploring forgiveness, taking on the ill feelings we harbor towards another. We must do this because Jesus instructs in today's Scripture that forgiveness is to be granted as we are praying.

Note in Jesus' words that He says nothing about the person who wronged us even being present. Nor does Jesus say anything about the wrongdoer's repentance being required. This is something that takes place strictly between God and us as we are praying.

But what does it mean for me to forgive the wrongdoer? The Greek word Jesus uses for "forgive" is instructive. It is the word aphiemi that literally means "to release" or "to let go". I forgive the wrongdoer when I release Him to God, when I let go of him to God. It is, after all, God's sole prerogative to judge and not mine. As I release the wrongdoer to God, I am letting go any penalty I might have wanted to inflict, any vengeance I might have wanted to seek. I am unconditionally releasing my supposed right to even the score.

This forgiveness, releasing, or letting go, is something I first do for me. It frees me from the wrongdoer. It releases me from the anger, resentment and pain caused by the wrong done to me. "When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free is us." (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*) Having been set free, I will then in time be able to feel compassion toward the wrongdoer. "When I pray for my enemy, hard as that is to do, my enemy's grip on me loosens. While we do not fully understand all this change in ourselves, we sense it." (Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*)

Jesus told us His secret for dealing with those who have wronged us: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44). We see Jesus doing this very thing on the cross as He prayed: "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34).

We may not feel like forgiving as we are praying, but we can obey Jesus and rely on Him as we choose to forgive. Theologian Richard McAlear writes about choosing to forgive:

Forgiveness is a decision that we make. It is a choice of the will. It is not a feeling. We do not need to feel forgiving or loving...If we are waiting to forgive until we feel loving, we might wait a long time. Rather, we choose to let go and we decide to forgive. It is a one-way process, a matter of the will. It is not an emotion and it is not necessarily reciprocal. (*Forgiveness: Experiencing God's Mercy*)

As you pray the Spirit of God might remind you of someone you need to forgive, and a 'prisoner' needing to be set free: you!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you if there is someone you need to forgive. Take plenty of time to do this and listen for God.
- If a person you need to forgive comes to mind, make the decision to forgive him/her. Release that person to God, including any penalty or hurt you might want that person to suffer.
- Pray for the person who hurt you, asking God in His time to give you love for him/her.
- Conclude your prayer by 'breathing in' God's forgiveness of you, as you 'breathe out' forgiveness for others.

"Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one. If I can't breathe out forgiveness upon the one who has hurt me, then I can't breathe in the forgiveness that God would have me take in."

(N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Vol. 2)

Discovering God in Our Day



*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,
“Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!”*

Genesis 28:16

What a wondrous world that Jacob awakened to that morning as he discovered that God was always with Him. And what a wondrous morning it can be for us as we discover that God is always with us. He is the astonishing God in whom *“we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28). God is active in our lives, continually revealing Himself to us in every nook and cranny. He is always present with us, but we are not always present to Him.

Ignatius of Loyola taught a way for us to become more aware of God’s presence in a special way praying: the Daily Examen. It is actually an attitude more than it is a process. Examen is not a misspelling, but the Latin word for the pointer on a balance scale indicating the weight of something. Ignatius taught the Daily Examen as a pointer to God’s presence throughout our daily lives. As we begin to pray the Examen we find our God-awareness growing as we discover God throughout our day.

As taught by Ignatius, we complete the day by prayerfully reviewing it with gratitude and by reflecting on two important questions:

- When did I most sense God’s presence in my day?
- When did I least sense God’s presence in my day? (Ignatius thought this question as important as the first.)

While Ignatius recommended the Daily Examen for both noon and night, most people practice it at the end of the day. Either way, people are ‘pointed’ to God’s presence and leading in their lives. It is exciting, as Jacob experienced, to awaken to the moment and to the ever-present God!

PRAYER RETREAT

- To complete your own Daily Examen follow the steps below:
 - Pray, asking God for light on your day. You want to look back on your day with God’s eyes, not merely your own. Some people like to burn a candle as a symbol of asking for God’s light on their day.

- Review your day with gratitude. The day you have just lived is a gift of God. Focus on the gifts of your day. Thank God for them: the words of a friend, the sights you saw, the food you ate... Thank God for all.
- Reflect on when: (1) you most sensed God's presence in your day; (2) when you least sensed God's presence in your day.
- Talk with God about your answers to the above two reflection questions.
- Look to tomorrow. Ask God to give you eyes to see Him in all things. Talk to Him regarding any concerns about tomorrow. Ask for His guidance and help. Ignatius encouraged people to talk with Jesus like they were talking with a friend.

“We pass from thinking of God as part of our life to the realization that we are part of his life.”

Richard Foster, *Prayer*

Shaping Prayers Around the Psalms



My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Psalm 22:1a

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27:46

The great Athanasius said, "Most Scriptures speak to us; the Psalms speak for us." (*Letter to Marcellinus*) Thus, the Psalms have so much to teach us about prayer, about how to talk to God. They give us words for expressing our feelings and thoughts to Him. The Psalms were, as well, Israel's prayer book, Jesus' prayer book, and the Church's through the centuries. Jesus found in the Psalms the words He wanted to pray on the cross (Matthew 27:46 quoting Psalm 22:1; Luke 23:46 quoting Psalm 31:5). The first Christians also found the Psalms speaking for them and learned to turn to them in times of trouble. Eugene Peterson looks at the many instances of God's people praying the Psalms and concludes:

The consensus on this, throughout the church's praying life is impressive. If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary. We cannot bypass the Psalms. They are God's gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive and honest...If we dismiss the Psalms, preferring a more up-to-date and less demanding school of prayer, we will not be without grace, but we will miss the center where Christ worked on His praying. (*Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*)

And how those first Christians worked on their praying the Psalms! When authorities warned them not to speak of Jesus or His resurrection, they called a prayer meeting. In that prayer meeting they instinctively turned to the Psalms to speak for them; they offered up a prayer shaped around the second Psalm, a psalm of David:

When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the

peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah” (Acts 4:24-26 quoting from Psalm 2:1-3).

When other Christians faced the seizure of possessions, and suffering and prison, they naturally turned to the Psalms: *“So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’”* (Hebrews 13:6 quoting Psalm 118:6)

The Bible teaches us that any psalm has a three-fold application in speaking first for the psalmist; second for Jesus; and third for the reader. The Psalms truly do speak for us! Luther wrote:

The Christian can learn how to pray in the Psalter, for here he can hear how the saints talked to God. The number of moods which are expressed here, joy and suffering, hope and care, make it possible for every Christian to find himself in it, and to pray with the psalms. (*Luther’s Works*, Volume 35)

Often when I don’t know how to pray, or my prayers are feeling stale, I like to pick up the Psalms and read a psalm or two to God. I have little trouble finding a psalm suited to my particular mood. I have found Athanasius to be right; the Psalms do truly speak for us as we pray!

PRAYER RETREAT

- First, select one of the following psalms to be your prayer today:
 - When you want to praise God for who He is and His character: Psalm 145:1-13
 - When you want to express love to God for His gracious care: Psalm 116:1-7
 - When you feel that God has forgotten you: Psalm 13
 - When you want to praise God for His care for you throughout life: Psalm 139:1-12
 - When you want to praise God for the wonder of His creation and the wonder of you: Psalm 8
 - When you want to praise God for His forgiveness: Psalm 32
 - When you feel depressed: Psalm 42
 - When you envy evil people: Psalm 73
 - When you feel no one cares: Psalm 142

- After choosing a psalm, read it aloud with feeling.
- Read the psalm a second time, silently, looking for a phrase or word that stands out to you.
- Spend a few moments meditating on that phrase or word.
- Talk to God about that phrase or word.
- Finally, take a few moments to be still in God's presence, concluding by praying The Lord's Prayer

“Wherever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian Church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Prayer Book of the Bible*

Praying the Prayers of Others



And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

I have been privileged and blessed to pray with some of God's greatest saints! I have prayed with Paul, Augustine, Francis, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Bonhoeffer and Corrie ten Boom, as I have prayed their prayers as my own. Their time-tested prayers have taught me a lot about prayer and about what matters to God. Praying the prayers of such people helps me see my blind spots. There is something about taking up the words of those who faced persecution, brought new life to the church, and were faithful unto death, that makes me pray with a little more faith and fervor!

But this blessing of praying the saints' written prayers is relatively new for me. For much of my life I thought that real prayer had to be my own spontaneous, impromptu words, not someone else's. But I think differently now. I think that theologian Richard Peace has it right in his caution about praying just our own prayers:

All of us get into a rut with our prayers. We tend to ask the same things in the same way over and over again. By means of the rich and powerful prayers of others we speak to God in ever-broader ways. Then in our spontaneous prayers we have a richer set of words and images to use in addressing God." (*Meditative Prayer: Entering God's Presence*)

Praying the prayers of spiritual giants gives us a new vocabulary of prayer. This allows us even greater freedom and fluency in our own praying. I frequently prepare for praying by reading a prayer of one of God's greats. I also like to pray the lyrics of a hymn by Wesley or Watts. They always stir me to prayer. The vision and wisdom of their words have stood the test of time, making me ready to pray them as my own. I hope that you will consider what praying the prayers of others can do for your praying. You might begin by the many printed prayers found in *The Book of Common Prayer* available free online at www.bcponline.org. I have been blessed to pray with some of God's greatest saints. I know you will too!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to pray one of the great prayers passed down to us from the fourth century. The prayer is known by its Latin name *Te Deum* (“Thee, O God”). It is thought by some to have been written by St. Augustine for his own baptism. Read, pray, and let yourself be caught up in worship of our God!

TE DEUM

You are God: we praise you;
You are the Lord; we acclaim you;
You are the eternal Father:
All creation worships you.
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,
Cherubim and Seraphim, sing in endless praise:
Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
The glorious company of apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you;
Father, of majesty unbounded,
your true and only Son, worthy of all worship,
and the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide.
You, Christ, are the king of glory,
the eternal Son of the Father.
When you became man to set us free
you did not shun the Virgin’s womb.
You overcame the sting of death
and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
You are seated at God’s right hand in glory.
We believe that you will come and be our judge.
Come then, Lord, and help your people,
bought with the price of your own blood,
and bring us with your saints
to glory everlasting.
(From *The Book of Common Prayer*)

- What one phrase stands out to you in Te Deum? Take a few moments to meditate on it.
- Talk to God about that phrase.
- Take a few moments to be still in God's presence.

“If they [prayers] are our own words they will soon, by
unavoidable repetition harden into a formula.”
C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

Suffering With the Persecuted Through Prayer



*Remember those who are in prison, as though you were
in prison with them; those who are being tortured,
as though you yourselves were being tortured.*

Hebrews 13:3

It has been called The Second Law of Spiritual Thermodynamics: “The greater the heat, the greater the expansion.” In other words, the greater the heat of persecution against the Church, the greater the expansion. Various Roman emperors discovered that the more they tried to stamp out the Church, the more it grew. Tertullian, a theologian from the early third century, observed, “The blood of Christians is the seed of the Church.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*)

Jesus forewarned His followers to expect persecution: “*Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name*” (Matthew 24:9). Presently, we suffer little persecution in North America, although it could come. But we do have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who suffer at this moment. George Weigel, a Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington’s Ethics and Policy Center, writes concerning the persecution of fellow Christians:

We have been living, and we’re living now, in the greatest era of persecution in Christian history. More Christians died for the faith in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries of Christian history combined... The assault on the Christian faithful today is ongoing, extensive and heart-rending. Solidarity with the persecuted Church is an obligation of Christian faith. (“Rediscovering the Martyrology”, *First Things*, Feb. 26, 2014)

Today’s Scripture commands us to stand in solidarity with our persecuted brothers and sisters. Specifically, we are told to “*remember*” them. In various New Testament letters we see repeated instances of “*remembering*” people by praying for them (Ephesians 1:16; Philemon 1:4; Colossians 4:18). We may not always be able to assist them with provision and protection, but we must pray for them. Note the emphasis on how we are to pray for them: “*as though we were in prison with them*” and, “*as though we ourselves were being tortured*”!

When Saul of Tarsus was on the road to Damascus to imprison Christians, the ascended Christ confronted him: “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*”

(Acts 9:4b). Christ's question to him speaks to our oneness with Christ and our oneness with other Christians. Perhaps it was Saul's realization that Jesus suffers with His followers which later prompted him to write: *"And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it"* (1 Corinthians 12:26a).

As the Body of Christ suffers today, so Christ suffers, and we suffer too! Therefore, we remember persecuted Christians and we pray.

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to be still in God's presence and feel *"as though you were in prison with them...as though you were being tortured."*
- Pray for persecuted Christians that they may have access to a Bible.
- Pray that they will love and forgive those who persecute them.
- Pray that the faith of persecuted Christians endures.
- Pray that they rejoice in sharing the sufferings of Christ.
- Check out the website of The Voice of the Martyrs. Simply go on your search engine and enter: "Voice of the Martyrs".

"Against the persecution of a tyrant the godly have no remedy but prayer."
John Calvin (Patrick Sookhdeo, *Heroes of Faith*)

Calling on God to Keep His Promise



“Come, Lord Jesus!”
Revelation 22:20b

The last prayer of the Bible erupts in three fervent little words: *“Come, Lord Jesus!”* It is fitting that the Bible ends in a prayer. Fitting that the grand love story of Scripture culminates with our response in prayer. No prayer of the Bible is more intense or concise than these three words. Here is the ultimate prayer arising out of the Scriptures, the deepest yearning of every believer’s heart. Even Greek and Latin speaking Christians of the first century so cherished this prayer they preserved it in the original Aramaic, Maranatha! (e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:22 *King James Version*).

It is impressive that a prayer for Jesus to come is offered up at the conclusion of the book of Revelation, with its repeated promise that Jesus is coming. He is coming for us and to set the world right! Yet, the apostle John, the author of Revelation, reacts to Jesus’ promise with the cry, *“Come, Lord Jesus!”* Jesus promised to come! John prays for Him to come!

We see John doing what people of prayer throughout the Bible do: calling on God to keep His promise. That is the key to effective, powerful prayer! Pleading the promises of God! George Mueller said that he always prayed with an open Bible:

...filling my praise and petition with God’s word. I pray God’s promise, His declarations concerning Himself. I pray His names and titles by which He reveals His nature and character. I pray the rights he gave the believer to bold and confident access. (Wendy Blight, *Living ‘So That’*)

The great American revivalist Dwight L. Moody said, “Tarry at a promise and God will meet you there.” (Lloyd Hildebrand, *Praying the Promises Changes Things*) We pour our prayers into God’s promises.

But the promise that is most on the apostle John’s mind as he closes out the Bible is Christ’s promise to come for us and to set the world right. This promise is at the heart of how Jesus taught us to pray: *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10).

We live in a world that is broken, a world that is not as God intended it to be. Our world agonizes in evil, writhes in suffering, cruelty and disease. All of us suffer the catastrophes of sin and death. But as people of faith, as people of prayer, we are the vanguard movement of God’s new world coming! So we fervently, believingly pray: *“Come, Lord Jesus!”*

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to meditate on Christ's coming and "a new heaven and a new earth" promised in Revelation 21:1-5a:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

- Now pray The Lord's Prayer, taking time to pause on the petition, "*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"
- Carry with you into the day the Bible's last prayer, "*Come, Lord Jesus.*"
- Notice how carrying this prayer with you reorients your life to the promise of Christ's return.
- The next time you gather with others for prayer, why not include this petition in your prayers? "*Come, Lord Jesus!*"

"The Church in sighs and groans, and by the mouth her of children, solicits the coming of Jesus Christ...Enkindle in me, O Lord, this desire; enable my poor soul to join the beloved disciple in this prayer: Come Lord Jesus; that she may go and lose herself in Thee, who art her Centre, her God, her all."

Haydock *Catholic Bible Commentary*

Returning to the Source Daily



Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

Daniel 6:10

There have been few days when I thought, “I am so busy that I don’t have time to eat today.” But there also have been lots of days when I thought, “I am so busy that I don’t have time to pray today.” My life has been more driven by the clock than driven by prayer. Ironically, the word “clock” comes from the Latin word clocca, a “bell” used for calling people to prayer.

Now, eager to grow in prayer, I am taking up the ancient rhythm of prayer three times a day. If I can find time to eat three times a day, then I can certainly find time to pray three times a day. Didn’t Jesus tell us that ‘man doesn’t live by bread alone’!

I cannot escape the obvious, that great men and women of God have punctuated their day with three set times of prayer. We see David lifting up his voice to God at “*Evening and morning and at noon*” (Psalm 55:17). We see Daniel holding to prayer three times a day even when it could cost him his life (Daniel 6:1-13). We ought not to be surprised when we see Christ’s first followers sticking to set times for prayer each day. Peter and John go up to the temple “*at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon*” (Acts 3:1). Even far removed from the temple, “*About noon...Peter went up on the roof to pray*” (Acts 10:9).

Popular Christian writer Phyllis Tickle writes about the importance of God’s people through the centuries setting aside three times for prayer each day:

“It was understood, that is, that at set hours of each day the faithful would interrupt the business of vocational life in order to praise and worship the Almighty One, thereby not only offering an appropriate sacrifice of time and deliberate intention, but also assuring that the thoughts and actions of each worshipper had been returned to the Source from which he or she had come and to which he or she would ultimately be accountable. (Quoted in Scott McKnight, *Praying with the Church*)

The Lord's Prayer is merely 71 words, making it a good way to begin praying three times a day. The Didache is a first century manual on the Christian life; it tells us that early Christians prayed the Lord's Prayer three times a day (Didache 8:11). I like to begin and end my day praying the Lord's Prayer and propping up the middle of my day by praying it as well. I often add a psalm to my brief prayer and talk with God about how the day is going. My prayers don't have to be long. But, these three times a day help me calibrate my activities with God's action in the world. These prayers start up and sustain throughout the day an ongoing conversation with God. Theologian Arthur Boers writes about the advantage of consecrating set times for prayer each day:

"[The Psalms] confirm that we can know God's presence at all times only if we set aside certain times for prayer. The Jews did not buy into a more current notion that since God is present everywhere and in all times we can pray whenever we feel like it. Rather, they believed that praying regularly at set and specific times helps focus and reorient one to God at all other times."

I've always found it possible to set aside time for three meals each day. Now I'm seeing that I can also set aside time for prayer three times a day. It does make a difference for me! I hope you will be blessed by trying it too!

PRAYER RETREAT

Take a few moments today to pray in the morning, at around noon, and in the evening. You might begin with the Lord's Prayer, pausing to meditate on one of the phrases as you pray. Then, briefly talk with God about your day – challenges you are facing, things for which you are grateful, instances where you are wanting God's help. Pray about what interests you, and in time your interests will grow with the wideness of God's love.

"We can too easily become 'time-clock humans' or even 'meal-driven people' by how our time is regulated. Is there another way?
There is: That other way is to let the hours of prayer shape our days."

Scott McKnight, *Praying with the Church*

Paying Attention to God's Actions



He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us through the prayers of many.*

II Corinthians 1:10-11

I saw these words on a sign at a spiritual retreat center near our home: "Day of Prayer for Busy People --- CANCELLED." I read the sign and wondered why a day of prayer for busy people would be cancelled. Was it that people were too busy? Did they think they had better things to do? Were they not interested? Or was it all of the above?

Seeing that sign about the day of prayer being cancelled really hit me. I thought of something Eugene Peterson had written about the perils of busyness:

"Busyness is the enemy of spirituality. It is essentially laziness. It is doing the easy thing instead of the hard thing. It is filling our time with our own actions instead of paying attention to God's actions. It is taking charge...The busy person is a lazy person because they are not doing what they are supposed to do." (Subversive Spirituality)

I was trained to be busy. I learned early to associate being busy with success and achievement in the world. My mother used to brag about her busy son. I was pretty sure that the busier I was the happier God must be with me. Then, slowly I began to see the damage that busyness did to my walk with God. Busyness was becoming the enemy of my being with God.

I do not think it accidental that most people are struggling with prayer. The Enemy of our souls never attacks us at the peripheral but goes straight for our jugular. William Cowper was right in the old hymn about how "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees." It's no wonder the Devil likes to make me think I am too busy to get down on my knees.

But in today's Scripture the apostle Paul is grateful for how the Corinthian Christians had helped by praying for him. Paul says that he had faced "so deadly a peril" and God had "rescued" him and would rescue him again as the Corinthians prayed for him.

I like the powerful word picture that Paul paints describing the effectiveness of the Corinthians' prayers. The Greek word (sunupourgeó),

translated as “*helping*”, is actually a compound of three words: “with” + “under” + “work”. Together those three words give us a picture of workers getting under a heavy load in order to work with each other in lifting the load. The word reminds me of the Amish working together for a “barn raising”. They get under the wood frame and, with each other, work to raise a barn.

So the Corinthian Christians had worked together through their prayers to rescue Paul from a deadly peril. We know that the Corinthian Christians were far from being spiritual giants (1 Corinthians 3:1-5), to say the least, yet they wielded great power as they prayed.

I am seeing more and more how prayer does make a difference in our world and in the church. We might not understand the ways of God or how prayer works, but God commands us to pray. Prayer must not be the last resort in trouble and need, but our first action.

On the Last Day, when all secrets are revealed, we will see the difference, the eternal difference that our prayers made. We will see that A. J. Gordon was right: “You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.” (*The Kneeling Christian*)

Lord, I am not too busy to pray today for the many needs I see around me! I want to do my part in getting under the load and working together with God and others in prayer!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Take a few moments to reflect on how “busyness” might be an enemy of your spirituality and your prayer life.
- When did you last feel too busy to pray?
- Think of an instance or two in which others “helped” you through prayer. Take a moment to give thanks for them.
- Write down the names of three people who need the “help” of prayer. Now pray for those three people.

“From the Scriptures and from our own experience we are certain that prayer changes things with respect to the way God governs, not only individuals, but society, the nations and the whole world. “

Ole Hallesby, *Prayer*

Entering God's Presence with Jesus



Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you in festal apparel." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him in the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by.

Zechariah 3:1-5

When I was in elementary school a perceptive teacher told me that I was a "visual learner" and then explained what she meant. She told me that I am one who learns best from images and pictures; I remember best what I can see or visualize. I think that is why I am drawn to the many visuals in Scriptures, the many images of deep spiritual truths. Such is the fascinating image given to us by the Old Testament prophet Zechariah.

Zechariah relates a vision he received of the high priest Joshua ministering before the altar of God. But as he ministers, Satan stands at his right hand accusing him. Zechariah makes a play-on-words, telling us the "Accuser" (Hebrew: Satan), stands there to "accuse" him. Here again we see Satan the Accuser in his characteristic role. Just at the same moment Joshua enters the Lord's presence, the enemy of our soul attacks.

But it is then the Lord intervenes on His servant's behalf: "And the LORD said to Satan (the Accuser), *The LORD rebuke you, O Satan (the Accuser)!*" Remarkably we see the high priest standing before God's altar "dressed in filthy clothes". The Hebrew original is more graphic: he is "dressed in excrement covered clothes". He is actually ceremonially unclean, rendered unfit to minister to the Lord.

Now "the angel of the LORD" enters the picture. Bible commentators explain that in the Old Testament "the angel of the LORD is the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. It is the Son of God who comes to the rescue, commanding those standing near the high priest: "Take off his filthy clothes." Then the angel of the Lord speaks words symbolic of the righteousness God gives in Jesus Christ: "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you in festal apparel." God takes away the sin and

the guilt of the sinner and clothes him (us!) in His very own righteousness!

This amazing imputation of righteousness is followed by the Lord's command: *"Let them put a clean turban on his head."* Significantly, the high priest's turban was imprinted with the words: *"Holy to the LORD"* (Exodus 28:36; 39:30). Those standing by the high priest did just as the angel of the Lord commanded them: *"So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him in the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by."*

Yes! The angel of the Lord was standing by! The Lord Jesus Christ stood by Joshua the high priest as he went before the altar. So it is Jesus Christ who stands with us as we enter God's presence to pray. He has taken away all of our sin and guilt and clothed us in His own righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). What a powerful visual God gives us! What a picture to take with us as we pray!

Chances are that the Accuser, Satan, has attacked as you have started to pray. You feel unworthy to enter God's presence. You are reminded of your sin and disobedience. If so, you might find helpful the commentary of Charles Haddon Spurgeon on this vision of Zechariah:

But stop, Christian! Do not think of renouncing your priesthood; do not let a sense of unfitness keep you from your service! Stand where you are; for remember, you are standing in the only place where pollution can be washed away—you are standing before the Angel of the covenant! (*Zechariah*)

No less than Israel's high priest we are *"a brand plucked from the fire"*. We stand before God clothed in all the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. We wear on our heads the proclamation that we are *"Holy to the LORD."* The Son of God makes us ready to pray!

PRAYER RETREAT

- Do feelings of guilt or shame ever trouble you as you pray or even keep you from praying?
- What does the text of Zechariah 3 say to you about your feelings of guilt when you pray?
- Now, knowing that you are clothed in Christ's righteousness and are "holy" to the Lord, talk with Him about whatever is on your heart.

"O draw me to Your Father's heart,
Lord Jesus, when I pray,
And whisper in my troubled ear,
'Your sins are washed away.
Come home with Me today!'
At home within our Father's house,
Your Father, Lord, and mine."

James Torrance, from poem *"I Know Not How to Pray"*

To Be Continued...

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

When our two sons were young they looked forward to Saturdays when my dad would come and take them in his “car truck” (El Camino) to spend the day with him on the farm. The boys looked forward to those days of fixing fences, cleaning out pens and consuming Dr. Pepper. I would later drive over to pick the boys up and bring them home.

My sons and my dad were usually pretty tired at day’s end, but excited to show me all they had accomplished. “Look what we did!” they would proudly proclaim. Then together they would walk me through their day, showing me repaired fences, cleaned pens and yes, empty Dr. Pepper bottles. I never knew who had more fun, my dad or my boys! They loved spending time with each other and loved working together.

The image of those blissful Saturdays often comes to me as I think about prayer! Abba Father loves to spend time with us and loves to work together with us for a new heaven and a new earth. I imagine that we will one day stand with Him and say, “Look what we did!”

In eternity past God made the decision to include us in His very life! He made the decision for us to “*work together*” with Him (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1). God has bestowed on us the unimaginable dignity of being able to make things happen as we pray.

It is my prayer that through these daily retreats you have been moved to spend more time in prayer being with God and working together with Him. After all, as the apostle Paul wrote, God “*is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.*” Just think! God will do more than “*we can ask or imagine*”!

Although this is the end of the Lent devotional, I hope that this is the beginning of our commitment to prayer, to daily spending time with God and being co-workers with Him through prayer. I encourage you to take a few moments to look back through this devotional for:

- Scriptures that spoke powerfully to you about prayer
- Prayer practices that seem right for you

You may want to take some time to journal about these particular Scriptures and prayer practices. But above all, take Scriptures and a few

prayer practices with you into the coming days! What God will do is beyond what you can ask or imagine!

God created you one-of-a-kind! God loves you so much that He made you with your own special way of being with Him. God will lead you further in that way! And one day as you stand in His presence, you together will say: "Look what we did!"

"To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."

Ephesians 3:21

We pray when we are meditatively quiet before God with Psalm 118 open before us; we pray while taking out the garbage; we pray when we are losing our grip and then ask God for help; we pray when we are weeding the garden; we pray when we are asking God to help a friend who is at the end of her rope; we pray when we are writing a letter; we pray when we are in conversation with our cynical and bullying boss; we pray with our friends in church; we pray walking down Main Street in the company of strangers.

Eugene Peterson,
Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Chris



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a ministry of Christian renewal

Rev. Dr. Timothy L. Smith serves as Executive Director of **Water from Rock Ministries, Inc. (WfR)**, a ministry of spiritual formation assisting people in their journey to greater intimacy with God. WfR is committed to exploring what it means to listen for God and experience His presence in the opportunities and challenges of daily living.

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