

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

September 14, 2025
Library Bible Study

Session 2: Just As We Are

- Review-seeing reality from God's point of view.
 - *Be still and know that I am God.*
 - *Trust in Him.*
- Do not pray like hypocrites.
- "God...gives grace to the humble."
- Prayer allows me to bring my doubts and complaints.
- At times we crave explanations and answers.
 - *"Without Jesus I am nothing"*

Besides being good theology, confession makes for good psychology.* Prayer, after all, is the currency of a relationship. Like many husbands, I had to learn in my marriage that repressed issues do not go away. Just the opposite. I would bring up a minor hurt or misunderstanding that had occurred several weeks or even months before, only to find it was no longer minor. In relationships, as in the physical body, a thorn close to the surface may work itself out, but an internal infection buried deep and disregarded will threaten health and even life.

When Jesus cut through the carapace of the Pharisees, some of the most religious people of his day, they wanted to do away with him. Truth hurts. Yet I cannot receive healing unless I accept God's diagnosis of my wounded state. God already knows who we are; *we* are the ones who must find a way to come to terms with our true selves. Psalm 139 cries out, "Search me, O God.... See if there is any offensive way in me." In order to overcome self-deception, I need God's all-knowing help in rooting out hidden offenses like selfishness, pride, deceit, lack of compassion.

Whenever I get depressed by a lack of spiritual progress, I realize that my very dismay is a sign of progress. I have the sense of slipping further from God mainly because I have a clearer idea of what God desires and how far short I fall. And that is why I could reply to Mark with words of hope. Like a recovering alcoholic, out of weakness and near-despair he had stumbled into the very state most amenable to God's grace and healing. Mark need not go through the painful stages required in humbling himself, for the circumstances of his life had already accomplished just that.

Walter Wangerin Jr. tells of a time early in his marriage when he had committed some wrong against his wife, Thanne. Even though he was studying in seminary in hopes of becoming a pastor, he had always avoided praying aloud with her. It seemed too intimate, too personal an act. This time, with a riptide of guilt sweeping away his shyness, he agreed. They lay for a while side by side in bed, each waiting for the other to start. Walt began with a hymn-like, formal prayer in the style he had learned in seminary.

* As Frederick Buechner notes, God asked Adam and Eve two penetrating questions after their first act of disobedience: "Where are you?" and "What is this you have done?" Therapists, he remarks, have been asking the same questions ever since. "Where are you?" exposes the present reality. They are hiding, naked, ravaged by never-before-known feelings of guilt and shame. "What is this that you have done?" exposes the past. In his encounter with Adam and Eve, God sets forth the consequences of their behavior and then provides clothing to equip them for the new state they have brought about. "They can't go back, but they can go forward clothed in a new way," says Buechner—the result any good therapist hopes to accomplish.

After a silence, he heard Thanne's simple, clear voice speaking humbly and conversationally to God about him, her husband. Listening to her, he began to weep. The guilt dissolved, and he learned that the humbling was no end in itself, but a necessary step to the healing.

Jesus warned his disciples not to pray like hypocrites, who love to perform in public; instead, they should go into a closet and pray to the Father, who alone sees what is done in secret. His instructions have puzzled some commentators, who note that the one-room houses of Jesus' day, probably including his own, had no closets. Jesus must have been using a figure of speech, suggesting that we construct an imaginary room, a sanctuary of the soul, that fosters complete honesty before God. Though I need not find a literal closet, somehow I must ensure that my prayers are heartfelt and not a performance. That happens most conveniently in a closed room, but it may happen also in a church full of other people, or sitting with an elderly parent in a nursing home, or lying next to a spouse in bed.

Helpless

Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby settled on the single word *helplessness* as the best summary of the heart attitude that God accepts as prayer. "Whether it takes the form of words or not, does not mean anything to God, only to ourselves," he adds. "Only he who is helpless can truly pray."

What a stumbling block! Almost from birth we aspire to self-reliance. Adults celebrate it as a triumph whenever children learn to do something on their own: go to the bathroom, get dressed, brush teeth, tie shoelaces, ride a bike, walk to school. When the child stubbornly insists, "I do it myself!" the parent takes secret pride in that independent spirit even when the child proceeds to make a mess of the task.

As adults we like to pay our own way, live in our own houses, make our own decisions, rely on no outside help. We look down upon those who live off welfare or charity. Faced with an unexpected challenge, we seek out "self-help" books. All the while we are systematically sealing off the heart attitude most desirable to God and most descriptive of our true state in the universe. "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus told his disciples, a plain fact that we conspire to deny.

The truth, of course, is that I am not self-reliant. As a first-grade student I hated having the teacher stand over me to correct my reading miscues; I wanted to "do it myself!" But had the teacher not assumed her proper role, I

strength!" I can think of several reasons. In a world that glorifies success, an admission of weakness disarms pride at the same time that it prepares us to receive grace. Meanwhile, the very weakness that drives us to pray becomes an invitation for God to respond with compassion and power.

The Lord upholds all those who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

In the presence of the Great Physician, my most appropriate contribution may be my wounds.

Humble

In words that apply directly to prayer, Peter says, "'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Note the progression: humility, the step down, makes possible God's lifting us up. By trying to be strong, I may even block God's power.

Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the tax collector draws a sharp contrast between a prayer of pious superiority, which God rejects, and a prayer of desperation—"God, have mercy on me, a sinner"—which God welcomes. Jesus drew this conclusion to his story: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

For a time I did not appreciate humility, which I confused with negative self-image. Humble Christians seemed to grovel, parrying compliments with an "It's not me, it's the Lord" attitude. Since then, however, I have seen true humility at work in the people I most admire. For them humility is an ongoing choice to credit God, not themselves, for their natural gifts and then to use those gifts in God's service.

My first employer, Harold Myra, showed humility in the kind and patient way he treated me, a young writer still wet behind the ears. He never made an editorial change without painstakingly convincing me that the change would actually improve my work. He saw as his mission not just to improve words but to improve writers, and he could do so only by walking me through the steps that led to the editing he proposed.

Other heroes of mine exercised humility by finding a group overlooked and underserved. I think of Dr. Paul Brand, a promising young physician who volunteered in India as the first orthopedic surgeon to work with leprosy

patients, many of them from the untouchable caste. Or of Henri Nouwen, professor at Yale and Harvard, who left those schools to become a chaplain among people having a fraction of the Ivy League students' IQs: the mentally handicapped at l'Arche homes in France and Canada. As I got to know both of these men, they demonstrated how downward mobility can lead to the success that matters most.

All of America watched how President Jimmy Carter handled the humiliation of losing an election and the subsequent shunning by his own party. Once the most powerful person in the world, he decided against golf and the talk-show circuit and devoted his retirement to such causes as helping the poor in Africa and building houses for Habitat for Humanity.

The cultures of ancient Greece and Rome did not favor humility, admiring instead the values of accomplishment and self-reliance. Likewise today, a modern celebrity culture shines the spotlight on a billionaire who takes delight in firing people, as well as on supermodels, strutting rap musicians, and boastful athletes. As theologian Daniel Hawk puts it, "The basic human problem is that everyone believes that there is a God and I am it." We need a strong corrective, and for me prayer offers that very corrective.

Why value humility in our approach to God? Because it accurately reflects the truth. Most of what I am—my nationality and mother tongue, my race, my looks and body shape, my intelligence, the century in which I was born, the fact that I am still alive and relatively healthy—I had little or no control over. On a larger scale, I cannot affect the rotation of planet earth, or the orbit that maintains a proper distance from the sun so that we neither freeze nor roast, or the gravitational forces that somehow keep our spinning galaxy in exquisite balance. There is a God and I am not it.

Humility does not mean I grovel before God, like the Asian court officials who used to wriggle along the ground like worms in the presence of their emperor. It means, rather, that in the presence of God I gain a glimpse of my true state in the universe, which exposes my smallness at the same time it reveals God's greatness.

Doubting

In one of his briefest parables Jesus described a man searching for treasure in a field. All too often I focus on the hiddenness of the treasure and the work required to dig it out. Much of Christian belief seems obscured: God hidden in a baby in a manger, and also in sacred words composed mainly by Jews

throughout their tortured history, and then most improbably in the church, an institution no more holy or supernatural than, well, myself.

I keep digging, searching for ways to explain a doctrine like the Trinity so that Jewish and Muslim friends can even comprehend it. I question the cost of God's slow plan of redemption and re-creation: can it really be worth all that pain, including God's own? Why would God mount a rescue plan for the human species but not the fallen angels? And will my few decades' sojourn on this planet truly determine how I will spend eternity?

On a trip to Japan I found myself late at night in a pastor's study in one of the largest churches in Tokyo (which isn't saying much, since the average congregation numbers thirty in a nation where Christians claim only 1 percent of the population). I had flown in that morning and had already endured a rigorous day of meetings. I wanted to check into my hotel room and go to sleep, but Japanese hospitality required this courtesy visit.

Ich bete wieder, du Erlauchter

RAINER MARIA RILKE, FROM *RILKE'S BOOK OF HOURS: LOVE POEMS TO GOD*

I am praying again, Awesome One.

*You hear me again, as words
from the depths of me
rush toward you in the wind.*

*I've been scattered in pieces,
torn by conflict,
mocked by laughter,
washed down in drink.*

*In alleyways I sweep myself up
out of garbage and broken glass.*

*With my half-mouth I stammer you,
who are eternal in your symmetry.*

*I lift to you my half-hands
in wordless beseeching, that I may find again
the eyes with which I once beheld you.*

The pastor pulled out a sheaf of papers and, through an interpreter, told me that during his entire career he had worried over this one issue but was afraid of speaking to anyone about it. Would I listen? I nodded for him to continue and reached for a mug, breaking my rule against late-night coffee.

For the next twenty minutes without interruption the pastor poured out the agony he felt over the 99 percent of Japanese who had not accepted Jesus. Would they all burn in hell because of their ignorance? He had heard of theologians who believed in people having a second chance after death and knew the mysterious passage in 1 Peter about Jesus preaching to those in Hades. Some theologians he had read seemed to believe in universal salvation although certain passages in the Bible indicated otherwise. Could I offer him any hope?

Thinking aloud, I mentioned that God causes the sun to rise on the just and unjust and has no desire that anyone should perish. God's Son on earth

*I am a house gutted by fire
where only the guilty sometimes sleep
before the punishment that devours them
hounds them out into the open.*

*I am a city by the sea
sinking into a toxic tide.*

*I am strange to myself, as though someone unknown
had poisoned my mother as she carried me.*

*It's here in all the pieces of my shame
that now I find myself again.*

*I yearn to belong to something, to be contained
in an all-embracing mind that sees me
as a single thing.*

*I yearn to be held
in the great hands of your heart —
oh let them take me now.*

*Into them I place these fragments, my life,
and you, God — spend them however you want.*

spent his last strength praying for his enemies. We discussed the view of hell presented in C. S. Lewis's intriguing fantasy, *The Great Divorce*, which shows people like Napoleon who have a second chance after death but opt against it. "Thy will be done," says God reluctantly to those who make a final rejection.

"I do not know the answer to your questions," I said at last. "But I believe strongly that at the end of time no one will be able to stand before God and say 'You were unfair!' However history settles out, it will settle on the side of justice tempered by mercy."

Like Job, I reached that conclusion not through observation or argument but through encounter. "Surely God will be able to understand my doubts in a world like this, won't He?" asked the Dutch prisoner Etty Hillesum from a Nazi concentration camp. I believe God will, in part because God's revelation to us includes eloquent expressions of those very doubts.

I challenge skeptics to find a single argument used against God by the great agnostics—Voltaire, David Hume, Bertrand Russell—that is not already included in such biblical books as Habakkuk, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and, yes, Job. These strong passages from the Bible express the anguish of dislocation: of hurt and betrayal, of life that doesn't make sense, of God who seems not to care or even exist. Most important, these accusations contained in the Bible itself are framed as prayers.

Prayer allows a place for me to bring my doubts and complaints—in sum, my ignorance—and subject them to the blinding light of a reality I cannot comprehend but can haltingly learn to trust. Prayer is personal, and my doubts take on a different cast as I get to know the Person to whom I bring them.

For many years I missed the point of Jesus' parable. The man may have labored to find treasure hidden in a field, but "then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." After that discovery, I doubt he dwelt much on the effort involved in digging.

Honest

I was teaching a class at a church in Chicago when a young woman raised her hand with a question. I knew her as a shy, conscientious student who attended faithfully but never spoke. The rest of the class seemed surprised as well and listened attentively. "I'm not always sincere when I pray," she began. "Sometime it seems forced, more like a ritual. I'm just repeating words. Does

God hear those prayers? Should I keep going even though I have no confidence that I'm doing it right?"

I let the silence hang in the room for a moment before attempting an answer. "Do you notice how quiet it is in here?" I said. "We all sense your honesty. It took courage for you to be vulnerable, and you touched a nerve with others of us in the room. You seem sincere, unlike a salesman, say, who gets paid to give a spiel. We're tuned in, listening, respectful, because you are being authentic. And I imagine it's the same with God. More than anything else, God wants your authentic self."

The Japanese, famous for their inscrutability, have two words that hint at the divided self. There is the *tatemae* (pronounced *tah-teh-mah-eh*), the part of myself I let people see on the outside, and the *hon ne* (pronounced *hon[gl]neh*), what takes place on the inside where no one can see. Perhaps we need three words: one for the image of ourselves that we project to colleagues at work, clerks at the supermarket, and other casual acquaintances; one for the more vulnerable parts we make visible to select family members and best friends; and a third for the secret places we never make known.

That third place is what God invites us to lay open in prayer. Prayer makes room for the unspeakable, those secret compartments of shame and regret that we seal away from the outside world. In vain I sometimes build barriers to keep God out, stubbornly disregarding the fact that God looks on the heart, penetrating beyond the *tatemae* and *hon ne* to where no person can see. As God informed the prophet Samuel, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

In truth, what I think and feel as I pray, rather than the words I speak, may be the real prayer, for God "hears" that too. My every thought occurs in God's presence. (Psalm 139:4, 7–8: "Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.... Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.") And as I learn to give voice to those secrets, mysteriously the power they hold over me melts away.

I know what happens in human relationships when I remain at a shallow level. With casual friends I discuss the weather, sports, upcoming concerts and movies, all the while steering clear of what matters more: a suppressed hurt, hidden jealousy, resentment of their children's rude behavior, concern for their spiritual welfare. As a result, the relationship goes nowhere. On the other hand, relationships deepen as I trust my friends with secrets.

3. When we come face to face with the reality of how little control we have over our future, many of us get a little nervous. What do you think could happen in our prayer life and in our relationship with God if, in the midst of our uncertain future, we intentionally chose to "be still and know that [he is] God"? *TXVST*

Bible Exploration

Be Still and Know That I Am God

Every day my vision clouds over so that I perceive nothing but a world of matter. It requires a daily act of will to remember what Paul told the sophisticated crowd in Athens: "[God] is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being' " (Acts 17:27–28).

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1. We tend to rely on our own sufficiency, but the Bible repeatedly exposes the true nature of earthly life. What unmistakable message about the God's Eye View of life is communicated through Psalms 39:4; 90:12; James 4:13–14; and 1 Peter 1:24?

2. Job's trials challenged his perspective and led him to reflect intensely on his human condition and God's role in the world.

- What did the Lord of the universe remind Job about when he was wallowing in self-pity and demanding that God respond to his theological queries? (See Job 38:4–11, and note that God's response continues through Job 40:2.)

- In his great discourse, God didn't provide even one specific answer to Job's probing questions. But what did Job say in response to God's thundering query, "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2), that shows he got God's message loud and clear? (See Job 42:1–6.)

3. Philip encourages us to recognize the importance of God's command in Psalm 46:10: *"Be still, and know that I am God."* He helps us realize that we are not in control of the world (or our futures) and that the appropriate response to our condition is to be still before our powerful and merciful God and turn over our concerns and problems to that God. Let's deepen our understanding of what God means by this command and explore how we might go about obeying it.