

# PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

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Library Bible Study

## A Vast Difference

- Review
- Image of God: friend v father
- Unbound by our rules of time and space
- Intelligent mysticism
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- Prayer-"the only entryway between into genuine self knowledge"

## PART I: KEEPING COMPANY WITH GOD

## A Vast Difference

All my friends have some similarities to me and some differences. One shares a background in Southern fundamentalism but thinks it bizarre that I read the sports pages; another enjoys many of the same authors I read but thinks me an old fogey for listening to classical music. Every relationship spawns a kind of dance between the self and the other. How much more so with a holy, ineffable God who lives in a realm of spirit.

I am overwhelmed by the vastness of God, the imbalance of any creature's relationship to such a being. "Since it is God we are speaking of, you do not understand it. If you could understand it, it would not be God," said Saint Augustine. We who barely comprehend ourselves are approaching a God we cannot possibly comprehend. No wonder some Christians through the centuries have felt more comfortable praying to saints or relying on intermediaries.

As a journalist, I have had occasion to spend time with famous people who make me feel very small. I have interviewed two presidents of the United States, members of the rock band U2, Nobel laureates, television stars, and Olympic athletes. Although I prepare my questions thoroughly in advance, I rarely sleep well the night before and have to fight a case of nerves. I hardly think of these people as mutual friends. I wonder what I would do if seated at a banquet next to, say, Albert Einstein or Mozart. Would I chitchat? Would I make a fool of myself?

In prayer I am approaching the creator of all that is. Someone who makes me feel immeasurably small. How can I do anything but fall silent in such presence? More, how can I believe that whatever I say matters to God? If I step back and look at the big picture, I even wonder why such a magnificent, incomprehensible God would bother with a paltry experiment like planet earth.\*

The Bible sometimes emphasizes the distance between humans and God (subjects of a king, defendants before a judge, servants of a master) and sometimes emphasizes the closeness (bride of a bridegroom, sheep of a shepherd, God's offspring). Without question, though, Jesus himself taught us to

\* Reynolds Price suggests an answer by analogy: "From the range of emotions that might inspire you or me, or another rational human, to create a universe, love seems the one most likely to cause such a mammoth and long-lasting enterprise." We understand God's motive only by weak comparisons. For example, why do parents endure the effort, expense, and sacrifice involved in raising children? For love. And that, in fact, is the very motivation described by Jesus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." In creating human beings, God wanted someone to love as well as someone capable of returning that love, no matter how feebly.

## 4. THE GOD WHO IS

count on the closeness. In his own prayers he used the word *Abba*, an informal word of address that Jews before him had not used in prayer. A new way of praying was born, says the German scholar Joachim Jeremias: "Jesus talks to his Father as naturally, as intimately and with the same sense of security as a child talks to his father."

The early churches adopted Jesus' style of intimate prayer. "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father,'" Paul assured them. Elsewhere he takes the intimacy one step further: "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

In one hand I hold the truth of God's vastness, and in the other hand I hold the truth of God's desire for intimacy. Dante spoke of "the love that moves the sun and other stars." I gaze at the stars and marvel at the apparent insignificance of the entire human experiment; then I read a biblical passage about God rejoicing over us with singing. Only lately have I understood that the vast difference between God and us allows this very capacity. God operates by different rules of time and space. And God's infinite greatness, which we would expect to diminish us, actually makes possible the very closeness that we desire.

A God unbound by our rules of time has the ability to invest in every person on earth. God has, quite literally, all the time in the world for each one of us. The psalmist exclaimed that "a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by," and the reverse also applies: to God, one day is like a thousand years.\* The common question, "How can God listen

\* Modern physics helps us conceive of the relative nature of time. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, a person traveling at the speed of light would see the entire history of the universe pass by in a single instant. On the other hand, a God who encompasses the entire universe can "view" what happens on earth and what happened fifteen thousand or billion years ago simultaneously (a word that doesn't really apply to a timeless God). We see the stars as they used to be, receiving light on Earth that they generated millions of years ago. As the Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch speculates in his fantasy *The Discovery of Heaven*, if we had the technology to place a mirror on a celestial object forty light-years away, beamed images from earth to that mirror, then gazed at it through a very powerful telescope, we would see right now reflections of what took place on earth eighty years ago—forty years for Earth's light to reach the distant planet, and forty years for the reflection to reach Earth. Past and present merge. An omnipresent Being large enough to coexist on the Andromeda galaxy and also on Earth would experience time in a completely different way, experiencing at once both the history of earth and the billion-year-old history of the galaxy, as well as all years in between. If a star explodes in Andromeda, this Being takes note of it immediately, yet will also "see" it from the viewpoint of an observer on earth many years later as if it has just happened. God is outside time, say the theologians, in a way that we are only beginning to imagine. Time, like everything else in creation, ultimately serves the creator.

to millions of prayer at once?" betrays an inability to think outside time. I cannot imagine a being who can hear billions of prayers in thousands of languages because I am stunted by my humanity. Trapped in time, I cannot conceive of infinity. The distance between God and humanity—a distance that no one can grasp—is, ironically, what allows the intimacy.

Jesus, who accepted the constraints of time while living on this planet, understood better than anyone the vast difference between God and human beings. Obviously, he knew of the Father's greatness and at times reflected nostalgically on the big picture, "the glory I had with you before the world began." Yet Jesus did not question the personal concern of God who watches over sparrows and counts the hairs on our heads.

More to the point, Jesus valued prayer enough to spend many hours at the task. If I had to answer the question "Why pray?" in one sentence, it would be, "Because Jesus did." He bridged the chasm between God and human beings. While on earth he became vulnerable, as we are vulnerable; rejected, as we are rejected; and tested, as we are tested. In every case his response was prayer.

### Unpredictable Presence

Besides the disproportion between us, relating to God presents another major challenge: invisibility. Although we "live and move and have our being" in God, as Paul said, my awareness of God's presence may be as fickle as the weather. I think back to the letter-writer from Cornwall, who had lost the feeling of intimacy: "Where is the blessedness I once knew?"

These things feed my faith: epiphanies of beauty in nature, sunbursts of grace and forgiveness, the portrait of God I get in Jesus, stirring encounters with people who truly live out their faith. And these feed my doubts: God's baffling tolerance of history's atrocities, my unanswered prayers, sustained periods of God's seeming absence. Meetings with God may include ecstasy and joy, or withdrawal and silence; always they include mystery.

To come to terms with this unpredictability I tell myself that every friendship has a misty side, that all relationships sometimes reveal and sometimes conceal. When I wonder why God doesn't simply "show up," I recall that when God did, especially in Old Testament days, the appearance hardly enhanced communication: usually the person fell to the ground, flattened by blinding light. In any event, I console myself, all relationships go through hot and cold spells. Sometimes communication is verbal, sometimes silent,

sometimes close, sometimes distant. Usually, these lectures to myself fail to convince. I am left with the unsettling truth that God, not I, has ultimate control over the relationship.

Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish girl who kept a journal during her stay at Auschwitz, wrote of an "uninterrupted dialogue" with God. She had epiphanies even in that morally barren place. "Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your Heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude." She knew the horror. "And I want to be there right in the thick of what people call horror and still be able to say: life is beautiful. Yes, I am here in a corner, parched and dizzy and feverish and unable to do a thing. I am also with the jasmine and the piece of sky beyond my window."

Hillesum concluded, "For once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with God and all of life becomes one long stroll—a marvelous feeling." I read her words of defiant faith and wondered what I might have written in my private journal as I breathed in ashes from the ovens each day, burnt offerings of a race "chosen" by Hitler. Yes, walking with God makes life one long stroll—but for how many, and how often is it a marvelous feeling?

Prayer is a subversive act performed in a world that constantly calls faith into question. I may have a sense of estrangement in the very act of praying, yet by faith I continue to pray and to look for other signs of God's presence. If God were not present at some submolecular level in all of creation, I believe the world would simply cease to exist. God is present in the beauties and oddities of creation, most of which go undetected by any human observer. God is present in his Son Jesus, who visited the planet and now serves as advocate for those left behind. God is present in the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned, as Jesus claimed in Matthew 25, and we serve God when we serve them. God is present in base communities in Latin America and in house churches that meet surreptitiously in barns in China as well as in cathedrals and buildings constructed to God's glory. God is present in the Spirit, who groans wordlessly on our behalf and who speaks in a soft voice to all consciences attuned to him.

I have learned to see prayer not as my way of establishing God's presence, but rather as my way of responding to God's presence that is a fact whether or not I can detect it. To quote Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Contact with God is not our achievement. It is a gift, coming down to us from on high like a meteor, rather than rising up like a rocket. Before the words of prayer come



stantial criticisms lodged against much of the new emphasis on contemplative spirituality, within both the Catholic and Protestant churches.<sup>21</sup> As I looked around for resources to help me with my prayer life as well as others', I saw how confusing the landscape was.

### "An Intelligent Mysticism"

The way forward for me came by going back to my own spiritual-theological roots. During my first pastorate in Virginia, and then again in New York City, I had the experience of preaching through St. Paul's letter to the Romans. In the middle of chapter 8, Paul writes:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (vv. 15–16)

The Spirit of God assures us of God's love. First, the Spirit enables us to approach and cry to the great God as our loving father. Then he comes alongside our spirit and adds a more direct testimony. I first came to grips with these verses by reading the sermons of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a British preacher and author of the mid-twentieth century. He made the case that Paul was writing about a profound experience of God's reality.<sup>22</sup> Eventually I found that most modern biblical commentators generally agreed that these verses describe, as one New Testament scholar put it, "a religious experience that is ineffable" because the assurance of secure love in God is "mystical in the best sense of the word." Thomas Schreiner adds that we must not "underempha-

size the emotional ground" of experience. "Some veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity, but the abuse of the subjective in some circles cannot exclude the 'mystical' and emotional dimensions of Christian experience."<sup>23</sup>

Lloyd-Jones's exposition also pointed me back to writers I had read in seminary, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, the seventeenth-century British theologian John Owen, and the eighteenth-century American philosopher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. There I discovered no choice offered between truth *or* Spirit, between doctrine *or* experience. One of the most accomplished of the older theologians—John Owen—was especially helpful to me at this point. In a sermon on the gospel, Owen gave due diligence to laying the doctrinal foundation of Christian salvation. Then, however, he exhorted his hearers to "get an *experience* of the power of the gospel . . . in and upon your own hearts, or all your profession is an expiring thing."<sup>24</sup> This heart experience of the gospel's power can happen only through prayer—both publicly in the gathered Christian assembly and privately in meditation.

In my pursuit of a deeper prayer life, I chose a counterintuitive course. I deliberately avoided reading any new books on prayer at all. Instead, I went back to the historical texts of Christian theology that had formed me and began asking questions about prayer and the experience of God—questions I had not had in my mind very clearly when I studied these texts in graduate school decades before. I discovered many things I had completely missed. I found guidance on the inward life of prayer and spiritual experience that took me beyond the dangerous currents and eddies of the contemporary spirituality debates and movements. One I consulted was the Scottish theologian John Murray, who provided one of the most helpful insights of all:

It is necessary for us to recognize that there is *an intelligent mysticism* in the life of faith . . . of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer. . . . He communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love. . . . The life of true faith cannot be that of cold metallic assent. It must have the passion and warmth of love and communion because communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion.<sup>25</sup>

Murray was not a writer given to lyrical passages. Yet when he speaks of “mysticism” and “communion” with the one who died and ever lives for us, he is assuming that Christians will have a palpable love relationship with him and do have a potential for a personal knowledge and experience of God that beggars the imagination. Which, of course, means prayer—but what prayer! In the midst of the paragraph, Murray quotes Peter’s first epistle: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” The older King James version calls it “joy unspeakable and full of glory.” Some translate it “glorified joy beyond words.”<sup>26</sup>

As I pondered that verse, I had to marvel that Peter, in writing to the church, could address all his readers like this. He didn’t say, “Well, some of you with an advanced spirituality have begun to get periods of high joy in prayer. Hope the rest of you catch up.” No, he assumed that an experience of sometimes overwhelming joy in prayer was normal. I was convicted.

One phrase of Murray’s resonated particularly, that we were called to an *intelligent* mysticism. That means an encounter with God that involves not only the affections of the heart but also the convictions of the mind. We are not called to choose between a Christian life based

on truth and doctrine *or* a life filled with spiritual power and experience. They go together. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for “something more,” for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.

### Learning to Pray

As Flannery O’Connor asked so plaintively, how, then, do we actually learn how to pray?

In the summer after I was treated successfully for thyroid cancer, I made four practical changes to my life of private devotion. First, I took several months to go through the Psalms, summarizing each one. That enabled me to begin praying through the Psalms regularly, getting through all of them several times a year.<sup>27</sup> The second thing I did was always to put in a time of meditation as a transitional discipline between my Bible reading and my time of prayer. Third, I did all I could to pray morning and evening rather than only in the morning. Fourth, I began praying with greater expectation.

The changes took some time to bear fruit, but after sustaining these practices for about two years, I began to have some breakthroughs. Despite ups and downs since then, I have found new sweetness in Christ *and* new bitterness too, because I could now see my heart more clearly in the new light of vital prayer. In other words, there were more restful experiences of love as well as more wrestling to see God triumph over evil, both in my own heart and in the world. These two experiences of prayer we discussed in the introduction grew together like twin trees. I now believe that is how it should be. One stimulates the other. The result was a spiritual liveliness and strength that this

Christian minister, for all my preaching, had not had before. The rest of the book is a recounting of what I learned.

Prayer is nonetheless an exceedingly difficult subject to write about. That is not primarily because it is so indefinable but because, before it, we feel so small and helpless. Lloyd-Jones once said that he had never written on prayer because of a sense of personal inadequacy in this area.<sup>28</sup> I doubt, however, that any of the best authors on prayer in history felt more adequate than Lloyd-Jones did. The early-twentieth-century British writer P. T. Forsyth expressed my own feeling and aspiration better than I can:

It is a difficult and even formidable thing to write on prayer, and one fears to touch the Ark. . . . But perhaps also the effort . . . may be graciously regarded by Him who ever liveth to make intercession as itself a prayer to know better how to pray.<sup>29</sup>

Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God *as* God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life.

We must learn to pray. We have to.

## TWO

### The Greatness of Prayer

*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

Ephesians 1:15–19

### The Supremacy of Prayer

A quick comparison of this prayer from Ephesians 1 with those in Philippians 1, Colossians 1, and later in Ephesians 3 reveals that this is how Paul customarily prayed for those he loved. At the grammatical heart of Paul's long sentence is a striking insight into the greatness and importance of prayer. In verse 17 he writes: "I keep asking that . . . you may know him better."