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The Necessity of Prayer

“We’re Not Going to Make It”

In the second half of my adult life, I discovered prayer. I had to.

In the fall of 1999, I taught a Bible study course on the Psalms. It became clear to me that I was barely scratching the surface of what the Bible commanded and promised regarding prayer. Then came the dark weeks in New York after 9/11 when our whole city sank into a kind of corporate clinical depression, even as it rallied. For my family the shadow was intensified as my wife, Kathy, struggled with the effects of Crohn’s disease. Finally, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

At one point during all this, my wife urged me to do something with her we had never been able to muster the self-discipline to do regularly. She asked me to pray with her every night. *Every* night. She used an illustration that crystallized her feelings very well. As we remember it, she said something like this:

Imagine you were diagnosed with such a lethal condition that the doctor told you that you would die within hours unless you took a particular medicine—a pill every night before going to sleep. Imagine that you were told that you

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could never miss it or you would die. Would you forget? Would you not get around to it some nights? No—it would be so crucial that you wouldn't forget, you would never miss. Well, if we don't pray together to God, we're not going to make it because of all we are facing. I'm certainly not. We *have* to pray, we can't let it just slip our minds.

Maybe it was the power of the illustration, maybe it was just the right moment, maybe it was the Spirit of God. Or, most likely of all, it was the Spirit of God using the moment and the clarity of the metaphor. For both of us the penny dropped, we realized the seriousness of the issue, and we admitted that anything that was truly a nonnegotiable necessity was something we could do. That was more than twelve years ago, and Kathy and I can't remember missing a single evening of praying together, at least by phone, even when we've been apart in different hemispheres.

Kathy's jolting challenge, along with my own growing conviction that I just didn't *get* prayer, led me into a search. I wanted a far better personal prayer life. I began to read widely and experiment in prayer. As I looked around, I quickly came to see that I was not alone.

“Can't Anyone Teach Me to Pray?”

When Flannery O'Connor, the famous Southern writer, was twenty-one years old and studying writing in Iowa, she sought to deepen her prayer life. She had to.

In 1946 she began keeping a handwritten prayer journal. In it she describes her struggles to be a great writer. “I want very much to succeed in the world with what I want to do. . . . I am so discouraged

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about my work. . . . Mediocrity is a hard word to apply to oneself . . . yet it is impossible not to throw it at myself. . . . I have nothing to be proud of yet myself. I am stupid, quite as stupid as the people I ridicule.” These kinds of declarations can be found in the journal of any aspiring artist, but O’Connor did something different with these feelings. She prayed them. Here she followed a very ancient path, as did the psalmists in the Old Testament, who did not merely identify, express, and vent their feelings but also processed them with brutal honesty in God’s presence. O’Connor wrote of:

. . . effort at artistry in this rather than thinking of You and feeling inspired with the love I wish I had. Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth’s shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon . . . what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know You God because I am in the way.¹⁰

Here O’Connor recognizes what Augustine saw clearly in his own prayer journal, the *Confessions*—that living well depended on the reordering of our loves. To love our success more than God and our neighbor hardens the heart, making us less able to feel and to sense. That, ironically, makes us poorer artists. Therefore, because O’Connor *was* a writer of extraordinary gifts who could have become haughty and self-absorbed, her only hope was in the constant soul reorientation of prayer. “Oh God please make my mind clear. Please make it clean . . . Please help me to get down under things and find where You are.”¹¹

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She reflected on the discipline of writing out her prayers in the journal. She recognized the problem of the form. "I have decided this is not much as a direct medium of prayer. Prayer is not even as pre-meditated as this—it is of the moment and this is too slow for the moment."¹² Then there was the danger that what she was writing down wasn't really prayer but ventilation. "I . . . want this to be . . . something in praise of God. It is probably more liable to being therapeutic . . . with the element of self underlying its thoughts."¹³

Yet with the journal she believed, "I have started on a new phase of my spiritual life . . . the throwing off of certain adolescent habits and habits of mind. It does not take much to make us realize what fools we are, but the little it takes is long in coming. I see my ridiculous self by degrees."¹⁴ O'Connor learned that prayer is not simply the solitary exploration of your own subjectivity. You are with Another, and he is unique. God is the only person from whom you can hide nothing. Before him you will unavoidably come to see yourself in a new, unique light. Prayer therefore leads to a self-knowledge that is impossible to achieve any other way.

Cutting through everything else in O'Connor's journal was a simple longing to learn truly how to pray. She knew intuitively that prayer was the key to everything else she needed to do and to be in life. She wasn't content with the perfunctory religious observances of her past. "I do not mean to deny the traditional prayers I have said all my life; but I have been saying them and not feeling them. My attention is always fugitive. This way I have it every instant. I can feel a warmth of love beating me when I think and write this to You. Please do not let the explanations of the psychologists about this make it turn suddenly cold. . . ."¹⁵

At the end of one entry, she simply called out, "Can't anyone teach me how to pray?"¹⁶ Millions of people today are asking the same ques-

tion. There is a sense of the necessity of prayer—we *have* to pray. But how?

A Confusing Landscape

Across Western society an interest has been growing in spirituality, meditation, and contemplation that began a generation ago, perhaps inaugurated by the highly publicized interest of The Beatles in Eastern forms of meditation, and fueled by the decline of institutional religion. Fewer and fewer people know the routine of regular religious services, yet some kind of spiritual craving remains. Today no one blinks to read a passing reference in a *New York Times* article that Robert Hammond, one of the founders of the High Line urban park in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, is going to India for a three-month meditation retreat.¹⁷ Scores of Westerners flood to ashrams and other spiritual retreat centers in Asia every year.¹⁸ Rupert Murdoch recently tweeted that he was learning transcendental meditation. “Everyone recommends,” he said. “Not that easy to get started, but said to improve everything!”¹⁹

Within the Christian church, there has been a similar explosion of interest in prayer. There is a strong movement toward ancient meditation and contemplative practices. We now have a small empire of institutions, organizations, networks, and practitioners that teach and coach in methods such as centering prayer, contemplative prayer, “listening” prayer, *lectio divina*, and many others of what are now called “spiritual disciplines.”²⁰

All this interest should not be characterized as a single, coherent “wave,” however. Rather, it is a set of powerful crosscurrents causing dangerously choppy waters for many inquirers. There have been sub-

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stantial criticisms lodged against much of the new emphasis on contemplative spirituality, within both the Catholic and Protestant churches.²¹ 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. (Rom 8:15–16)

These verses explain that 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.²² 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 “underemphasize 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.”²³

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.”²⁴ 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 them questions about prayer and the experience of God—questions I had not had in my mind very clearly when I studied them 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 theologian I consulted was the Scottish theologian John Murray, who provided one of the most helpful insights of all:

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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.²⁵

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.”²⁶

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

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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.²⁷ 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

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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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

Prayer is the only entry way 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.