

PRAYING LIKE MONKS, LIVING LIKE FOOLS
An Invitation to the Wonder and Mystery of Prayer

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SAMPLE FOR REVIEW ONLY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Ch. 1 - Holy Ground

Ch. 2 - Be Still and Know (Prayer Posture)

Ch. 3 - Our Father (Adoration)

Ch. 4 - Search Me and Know Me (Confession)

Ch. 5 - On Earth As It Is In Heaven (Intercession)

Ch. 6 - Daily Bread (Petition)

Ch. 7 - The Middle Voice (Prayer as Participation)

Ch. 8 - Laboring In Prayer (Praying for the Lost)

Ch. 9 - Ask, Seek, Knock (Silence & Persistence)

Ch. 10 - Rebellious Fidelity (Unceasing Prayer)

Epilogue

Appendix 1 - The Intercession of Christ

Appendix 2 - Searching and Naming

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INTRODUCTION

It's eerily quiet tonight in the city that never sleeps. The sirens and car horns, street noise from passersby, crowded restaurants and rambunctious bars—the soundtrack humming beneath the life I've known for, well, going on twelve years now—it's all gone silent. You could hear a pin drop in New York City.

I am writing to you from the modest kitchen table of my cozy Brooklyn apartment. The year is 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented suffering, a startling interruption to “normal life,” and a profound loss of security and control. Loss of control comes in an endless variety of forms: a car accident, a phone call, a financial hole we can't climb out of, a relationship we're unable to repair, or a global pandemic. Whatever its origin, it all leads to the same place: a search for help outside of the self.

How am I going to get through this? Why is this happening? What could possibly change the narrative? For many, those sorts of questions, brought on by outside events, produced an internal response: *prayer*.

Of course, for every person desperately turning to prayer in 2020, there was another looking at the same widespread crisis saying, "Good riddance," to God. On one side of the coin, the coronavirus pandemic is an event causing many comfortable agnostics to turn to prayer. On the other side of that very coin, though, the praying voices of many faithful churchgoers have gone silent.

The same set of circumstances that has the world turning *to* God has the church turning *from* God. The world knocks on the doors of the church, but those in the pews are scrambling for the exits. For each one desperately whispering, "Help," to God in the past year, there was another dejectedly whispering, "You're no help at all."

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Both people, experiencing the same circumstances, talking to the same God. Both are forms of prayer. Both, in fact, are biblical prayers.

The Phenomenon of Prayer

Already today, before you read these words, plenty of people have prayed. Catholics have recited the poetic prayers of the historic saints. Muslims have spread out their rugs, bowed their foreheads to the ground, and begun chanting the Quran in unison. Jews have written pleas to Yahweh on small pieces of paper, rolled them up and wedged them into Jerusalem's Wailing Wall. Buddhists have meditatively emptied themselves, searching for an enlightened state of self-forgetfulness. Tibetan monks have spun a wheel, holding the wadded-up pages of prayer journals, like a game of divine roulette. And, somewhere, a staunch, convinced atheist in a hospital waiting room has buried his head in his hands and muttered a few desperate words to a God he doesn't even believe is there to listen. And all that was today, before you read these words.

If you are a churchgoing Christian in the West, you've become a sociological anomaly. The Western Church is declining in basically every statistical measure. Still, in a society losing interest in and growing suspicious of the church, prayer isn't going anywhere. According to Gallup research, this week, more Americans will pray than will exercise, drive a car, have sex, or go to work. Nine out of ten Americans pray regularly. Three out of four pray every day. Any way you measure it, prayer is bigger than the church (and it's not close).¹

Everybody prays. Everybody always has. And there's no end in sight.

Prayer seems to be instinctive, part of human nature. Primitive peoples and enlightened Westerners, African tribes and American suburbs, touring musicians and stay at home moms, insecure artists and ruthless

¹ *Gallup*: George H. Gallup, Jr., *Religion in America 1996* (Princeton, NJ: The Princetown Religion Research Center, 1996), 4, 12, 19.

investors, doubting atheists and devout creationists, they're all praying. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."² We pray. We can't help it.

Prayer invites you to learn to listen to God before speaking, to ask like a child in your old age, to scream your questions in an angry tirade, to undress yourself in vulnerable confession, and to be loved, completely and totally loved, in spite of everything.

And yet, most people, even most Bible-believing Christians, find little life in prayer. Prayer is boring or obligatory or confusing or, most often, all of the above.

The Mystery in the Middle

Stories are often told of dramatic answers to prayer—stories that begin with desperate need and end with miraculous intervention. I'm not that interested in the beginning or even the end of the story when it comes to prayer, though. What I'm interested in is the middle. The middle is where the mystery lies. The middle is where all our questions about prayer are littered.

Is prayer really necessary? If God is all-powerful, that means he accomplishes what he wants, when he wants, right? So why does he need me to ask?

Why does God sometimes seem to answer prayers, but only after a long, long period of asking? If the answer was, "Yes," why did he make me sweat it out?

Why doesn't God answer my prayers for lost friends and family? I mean, he wants to redeem the world, right? He wants relationship with every person. He wants to answer prayer. So, if every box is checked, why isn't it happening?

I know we have a spiritual enemy. But, if Jesus was victorious over Satan, then is there any real opposition left to interfere with my prayers?

What is actually happening when I pray? Is anything happening because I prayed that wouldn't happen if I didn't? Or is anything not happening because I prayed that was bound to happen otherwise?

Do my prayers actually matter? Do they matter to God, and do they matter in real life in the real world? At the end of the day, what is happening in the middle?

This book is about precisely that: the mystery in the middle of our prayers.

Saints, Sleepwalkers, and Skeptics

I'm writing on prayer because prayer is the dangerous pilgrimage I'm on. And like a walk on the Camino de Santiago, it's as arduous as advertised and even more worth it than anticipated.

I'm writing on prayer because I love the church. I believe the Christian church is the hope of the world. I also love the generations shrugging off the church, not because of spiritual disinterest, but because they're taking the sincerity of their spiritual search elsewhere.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Prayer*

I'm writing on prayer because I trust God to be God. I believe—really believe—that those who seek him will surely find him.³ I believe that God is loving enough that a conversation starter is all he needs to draw someone all the way home.

I'm writing to saints, sleepwalkers, and skeptics.

To the saints, this book is an invitation into the deep end of the pool. These pages hold a collection of treasures from various eras and expressions in the Christian tradition—from the great cloud of biblical witnesses, to Desert Mothers and Fathers, to Benedictine and Eastern Orthodox monks, to Catholic philosophers, fiery reformers, and modern evangelicals. Most of us get about knee deep in the Christian life, discover that the water feels fine, and stop there. We never swim in the depths of divine intimacy Jesus won for us. This book is an invitation to swim.

To the sleepwalkers, this book is a bucket of cold water doused over your drowsy head. Far too many of us find God admirable but boring. The spiritual life is the “right” way, the “good” way, but excitement is found in our social calendars, favorite sports teams, sexual conquests, or career trajectories. There is a tragic disconnect between the sacred and the secular in today's Christianity that's led to an unbiblical divorce between a “spiritual life” (made up of activities like Scripture reading, prayer, and if you're going for extra credit—tithing) and “normal life” (made up of basically everything else).

To the skeptics, this book is an invitation to what cannot be taught, only be discovered. It's written as an open invitation to get off the comfortable fence of ultimate uncertainty and find out if God really is knowable or not. An invitation to be found by God in the place he's most faithfully been found throughout history—not in a megachurch with Broadway lights and arena-rock fog machines or in the eloquent podcast of a contrarian thinker—but in the bare silence of you and the endless expanse beyond you. “Is there an infinitely loving, altogether good author behind this grand story or not? And if there is, what are the chances he's gently trying to catch my attention?” The answers to those questions can only be discovered. This book is an invitation to discovery through prayer.

Prayer is the intersection between an out-of-touch Western church and a spiritually curious Western world. In an increasingly Post-Christian America—spiritually interested but religiously suspicious, thirsty for mystical experience but spare me the advice of anyone deemed a “professional,” thank you very much—prayer is the one aspect of the historic, orthodox Christian faith that isn't threatening to the emerging socio-cultural climate surrounding the church. In fact, it's inviting.

Prayer is also the theme of my life. It has been up to this point, and it will be for however many days I get in this occasionally beautiful, often dark world. Prayer is how I discovered God. Prayer is why I became a pastor. Prayer is the source of my life's greatest celebrations, most heart-rending disappointments, and most confusing (and still unanswered) questions. Prayer is not a soft place to lay your head or a workout routine for burning spiritual fat. It's a wild, unpredictable adventure that only those brave enough to strip themselves of artificial identities, get the wind completely knocked out of them a time or two, and see beauty in mystery will ever take. Proceed with caution. Prayer is not for the faint of heart.

Pray As You Can: Rebellious Fidelity for Saints, Sleepwalkers, and Skeptics is a catalog of prayer, each chapter ending with an invitation to practice—a simple starting place for moving past consideration to discovery. Don't read this book for its content. Read its content for its practices. The real treasures are found after you close the book and begin the conversation.

That's where we're headed, but this story begins in a very ordinary place: the parking lot of a public middle school.

³ Deuteronomy 4:29; Proverbs 8:17; Jeremiah 29:13; Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9; Acts 17:24-28

CHAPTER 1

HOLY GROUND

Pray As You Can

Not another soul in sight. No one else would be here at sunrise on a holiday. I sat motionless behind the wheel of a borrowed car idling in the parking lot, sobbing—overwhelmed by tears of gratitude.

I hadn't laid eyes on this building in nearly two decades, but here I was: staring at the public middle school that somehow became a temple to me, a cathedral, a meeting place, the hinge point of my whole life.

It's always the common places that turn out to be holy, isn't it? A burning bush in that same familiar field where Moses punched the clock every day for forty years. The king's sitting room where Mordecai leaned close enough to whisper into Esther's ear. The upstairs windowsill where Daniel rested his elbows while he defiantly prayed against royal law. The depressed old barn of a poor farmer on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The beach Peter docked at since he was a boy. The duplex on a seedy street in Jerusalem where the wind started blowing inside.

It only takes a moment to turn an everyday place into holy ground. That's what happened to me here.

An Experiment in Transcendence

When I was 13 years old, I wasn't sure I was buying all the Jesus stuff. I was a curious kid, but I wasn't an easy sell. "Look, if this story is real, I want in. But if it's a fairytale, I'd prefer to find out sooner than later, so I don't waste so much time singing mediocre songs and sitting through all these meetings." That was my logic.

Naturally, when a mentor approached me with an experiment of sorts, it caught my attention.

"What do you think God would do in the lives of your unbelieving friends if you spent every day this summer walking a circle around your school in prayer for them?"

"I have no idea."

"Why don't you find out?"

I liked that idea.

My older brother had just turned 16, meaning any reason to drive anywhere was a good one. Every single day that summer, he drove me to the one place I planned to avoid: school. I wore a dirt path into the thick summer grass walking the school grounds with a folded-up student directory in my right hand. This was back in the day when they gave everyone in the school everyone else's phone number. What were they thinking? Never once did I use the school directory until that summer, when it became my personal "Book of Common Prayer," guiding the whispered words of my uncertain, pubescent voice while I paced around the outside of that familiar building, holding every last name in my soon-to-be eighth grade class before the God I only half-believed in.

Something happened to me that summer.

I fell in love with the God I wasn't sure was listening. I discovered that I didn't just "need" God in some ultimate sense. I liked God. I enjoyed his presence. I looked forward to his company. That's all I knew for sure.

On the first day back to school, I asked to speak to the principal. I walked into the office I'd narrowly avoided the previous two years and came right out with it. I just asked him, "Can I start a new extra-curricular school program—one about Jesus?"

"Well, you'll need a teacher to sponsor it. Every school club has to have a teacher sponsor. Find a teacher, and you're free to go for it."

That's how I ended up leading a Christian outreach meeting in a fluorescent-lit, white-tiled math classroom at Brentwood Middle School. We met at 6:30am on Wednesday mornings, an obviously convenient time. What twelve- or thirteen-year-old *doesn't* want to explore existential questions of origin and purpose before the sun comes up?

My entire strategy for hosting these meetings was simple: I'd sit in my bedroom on Tuesday evenings, open the Bible at random to a page somewhere in the middle, pick a paragraph on that page, read it with absolutely no other context or biblical literacy, jot a few thoughts on a sheet of loose-leaf paper of my own interpretation, then read and explain that passage to whoever showed up the following Wednesday morning. It was a recipe for disaster, not revival.

But I had one thing going for me: I prayed.

I went to school an hour early on Wednesdays to lead that group, so I went to school an hour early on Tuesdays and Thursdays to keep thumbing through that, now pocket-creased, heavily frayed, and worn-out school directory, praying name-by-name for my classmates. My mom, the believer who led me to faith, actually sat me down and asked me to chill out with all the prayer because she was losing too much sleep taking me to school so early—true story.

A couple months into these meetings, so many students were coming, we had to move from a math classroom into the school's theater. By the end of that school year, approximately one third of my 8th grade class had come into relationship with Jesus in the darkness of the early morning, with all the atmosphere of hospital lighting, through the potentially heretical sermons of a 13-year-old skeptic.

It's either completely ludicrous or utterly breathtaking to think that, in the midst of all the insecurity of a 13-year-old boy—the nerves of going out for the basketball team, the awkward (and slightly late) arrival of puberty, the sweaty palms of school dances—there was also the Spirit of the living God bending history in loving response to the prayed mumblings of a kid. And not because he finds that kid particularly brilliant or his suggestions on how to run the world innovative, but simply because he finds this kid in all of his insecurity, awkwardness, and adolescent nervousness to be irresistibly lovable.

That's ludicrous, or it's breathtaking.

Take Off Your Shoes

All of that was 20 years ago now, as I sat in a borrowed car in that old familiar parking lot, slowly prying open the driver door. When my foot hit the pavement, the sun was just beginning to backlight the sleepy, gray sky. There was a streaming line of parked yellow school buses resting for the holidays. Every door to the building was chain-locked and bolted shut, not that I had any intention of going in. It was walking around the outside that had drawn me here at this hour. I wanted to walk the ground where I'd worn the tread off my shoes in prayer laps, the little loop that had come to define my spiritual life.

I was now 31, a pastor in Brooklyn, New York.

My family had moved out of this town shortly after that defining eighth grade year, and I hadn't been back to Brentwood since. I hadn't returned to this place, but this place, what happened here, never left me.

My in-laws live about a half hour away from the school, and I was at their house for Christmas. I got to thinking—I haven't laid eyes on that school building in 20 years.

So, I drove back there. Timed my arrival for 6:30 AM, just for old time's sake.

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”⁴

I slipped my shoes off and felt the ice-cold pavement cut right through my socks.

I stood in that cleft cut for a flagpole on the hill that rolled down the school's front lawn—the hidden place where I used to sit as a 13-year-old praying by name for my friends most Tuesdays. I walked over to that patch of sidewalk where I sat on Thursdays, alone at first, a group of adolescent revivalists gradually growing around me as that year wore on. I walked the exact path I wore into the grass circling that building in prayer, and as I did, the space between heaven and earth seemed paper thin.

To everyone else, this is a dingy old public middle school in need of government funding and mild renovations. To me, this is holy ground. This is the place God started something in me that's never stopped. This is the place I found out what Jesus was talking about when he said, *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”*⁵ So I walked that ground and prayed with tears streaming down my face through a trembling voice that could barely get a word out.

Pray About Everything

There are plenty of biblical passages on prayer, so there are no shortage of places to start grappling with this sacred mystery. However, it probably never gets more concise and straightforward than Paul's instructions to the church at Philippi near the end of his letter:

“The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”⁶

One of the more frustrating aspects of Scripture is that it rarely reads like Ikea instructions. If God would just lay it out, step by step, then I'd do it. But for some reason he's determined to speak in stories, analogies, and riddles.

This passage is proof that it's not that simple. Right here, it's laid out step by step, but, generally speaking, we don't follow the steps. *Do not be anxious about anything. Pray about everything.* But most Christ followers spend far more hours turning overanxious thoughts than surrendering them in prayer. If it's right there, so plain and clear, why not take God up on such a satisfying exchange?

Short answer: We don't buy it.

We think, “Come on. It's just not that simple.”

⁴ Exodus 3:5

⁵ John 15:7

⁶ Philippians 4:5-7

As pastor of a church primarily filled with young adults in the first half of life, I get a whole lot more questions about managing anxiety than I get about prayer. Anxiety is the soundtrack humming beneath modern life, so I have plenty of conversations with anxious people.

It's not just a diagnosis of others, though. The truth is, I'm more familiar with anxiety than peace. I'm more well-acquainted with a subconscious drive to control the circumstances overwhelming me than the unburdening freedom promised in prayer. I'm not a master counselor on the other side of the divide offering you the miracle mantra. I'm right there with you.

God promises peace—a supernatural sort of peace we can't even logically reason out—in place of crippling anxiety. The means of that exchange is prayer. But most people, regardless of spiritual maturity, stage of life, psychological awareness, or personality type do not experience the “anxiety for peace” exchange promised through prayer.

So why not?

Why Don't We Pray?

The obvious obstacles to prayer live on the surface: You're busy. You're social. You're (at least trying to be) successful and desirable and socially conscious. All those take time, so the competition for your undivided attention is stiff.

And, of course, there's the fact that you carry the internet around in your pocket. 97% of Americans own a cell phone, and for 85% of them, it's a smartphone of some kind.⁷ Every down moment is now spent on Reddit threads, scrolling an Instagram feed, or getting into political arguments on Twitter. So you're busy, and you're distracted.

Still, you likely find time to eat and sleep and maybe even exercise with some consistency. Even in a very busy, very distracted world, people still make time for what really matters to them. So there's something deeper, beneath the surface, that keeps us from praying.

I think it's this: for most of us, prayer doesn't resolve our anxiety. Scripture teaches, “Don't be anxious. Just pray.” Maybe we don't because prayer comes with plenty of reasons to be anxious. Prayer, itself, makes us anxious because it uncovers fears we can ignore as long as we don't engage deeply, thoughtfully, vulnerably with God.

First, we must name the fears.

1) We Don't Pray for Fear of Being Naive

The scenes of my life play out against the backdrop of a fiercely logical, intellectual city. In that environment, there is no greater sin than naïveté. In a city like New York or Portland (I've spent my entire adult life between the two), there is nothing less fashionable than a state school grad from a midwestern suburb fresh off the plane and wide-eyed in the big city. Innocence is terribly out of style.

Everything we interact with in this small, cramped, secular world of our own making, we have the potential of mastering. In fact, we must master it quickly in order to survive—the most efficient route between home and the office, how to move up the ranks at work, how to eat sushi without looking stupid, how to cut lanes on

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

your bicycle and live to tell the tale. And if we can't master it, we can always avoid it. I'll just change industries, avoid chopsticks, and take an uber.

Prayer can't be mastered. Prayer always means submission. To pray is to willingly put yourself in the unguarded, exposed position. There is no climb. There is no control. There is no mastery. There is only humility and hope.

To pray is to risk being naive, to risk believing, to risk playing the fool. To pray is to risk trusting someone that might let you down. To pray is to get your hopes up. And we've learned to avoid that. So, we avoid prayer.

2) We Don't Pray for Fear of Silence

Many are pretty comfortable with the spirituality they've got, and prayer—really living like everything Jesus says about prayer is true—risks the possibility of silence.

“Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life...,” writes Dallas Willard. “And in the quiet, what if it turns out there is very little between us and God?”⁸

What if I actually strip away the music and the community and the sermon, strip away all the noise of my familiar faith expression? Left with just me and God, what if I discover there's actually not much to just me and God?

Prayer means the risk of facing silence where we're addicted to noise. It's the risk of facing a God we've mastered talking about, singing about, reading about, and learning about. It means risking real interaction with that God, and the longer we've gotten used to settling for the noise around God, the higher the stakes. What if it's awkward, or disappointing, or boring, or what if God stands me up altogether?

When you've got that much to lose, prayer might be scarier than the avoidance of never being alone with God.

3) We Don't Pray for Fear of Selfish Motives

We are paralyzed by self-evaluation. Prayer sputters when we evaluate and second guess the words we speak to God as they come out of our mouths.

Why do I really want this? What's behind this request? Have I really put in enough time with God to ask for something like this, or am I just texting him when I need something? Is this desire really pure enough to bring before God?

Let's say, hypothetically, your roommate doesn't know Jesus. Before uttering a word of prayer for her, you're confronted by a question that spirals inward. Why do I *really* want my roommate to find God? Is it because of a pure desire for her to be met by divine love that makes her whole? Or do I find comfort in someone else reaching the same conclusion I've made, like if this whole thing is just a superstitious way of making life bearable, at least they'll laugh at *us* one day, not just *me*? Or do I think I've got all the answers and the world would be better if everyone thought like me, believed like me, and behaved like me? Am I just cloaking narcissism in faux compassion? Or is it that I carry around some sort of religious guilt my conservative grandma drilled into me as a kid, so now I pray for my roommate but it's really just to feel okay about myself?

⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (confirm source! — RHB quotes this in *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*)

We know the cacophony of motives forever swirling inside of us all too well. When we pray, we become increasingly aware of those motives. And some are paralyzed by the subsequent self-evaluation.

4) We Don't Pray for Fear of Doing it Wrong

Some of us are kept from praying because we listen to everyone else's prayers and it makes us feel like we're following Winston Churchill in high school speech class.

I'm not eloquent. I'm not confident. I'm not comfortable. I hear other people pray out loud, and it only furthers the insecurity.

Many Christians spend years limiting their experience of prayer to sitting in a pew while a professional Christian talks to God in words they'd never use in normal conversation, leading to the misconception, "I must be doing it wrong."

Some of us don't pray often, not yet anyway. Maybe one day we'll master the lingo and learn the mechanics.

Why Pray?

There we have the fears, and if all that's true, then why *would* we pray?

1) Pray Because You're Overwhelmed

The great social sin of the modern world is naïveté. Belief is out. Cynicism is in. Where did that modern phenomenon come from?

Historically, the Enlightenment put forth the great myth of human progress, which assumes that with the passing of time everything is improving, people are becoming more whole, and the world is getting steadily better. That assumption, which served as the backbone of the developing world, was deflated by two world wars and the bloodiest, most barbaric century in recorded history. The balloon was popped on the optimism of human progress, leading to an equally widespread sweep of disillusionment.

You and I have been groomed by a Post-Enlightenment story of deconstruction that doesn't trust God anymore, but has plenty of reasons not to trust people, either. The result is multiple generations of people who find safety in pretending they don't need either one—I can trust myself, guide myself, be enough for myself.

Jesus once wisely said, "You know a tree by its fruit."⁹ So what's the fruit of that story of self-sufficiency in the life of the modern person? We're overwhelmed. Everyone I meet is drowning in "their thing." It doesn't matter if "your thing" is an artistic endeavor, profit margins, wining and dining clients, or raising children. We can't see past "our thing" because "our thing" (whatever it happens to be) is all-consuming.

We've avoided becoming naive, but we've done it at the behest of becoming overwhelmed. The story that was supposed to free us is really just swapping jail cells. If the story you thought would free you is trapping you, the logical thing to do is look beyond it. Instead, even in the church, our prayers don't exchange overwhelmed lives for transcendent peace. They simply drag God into our overwhelmed lives, and the only way we can make him fit is to shrink him down to a reduced size. We keep on praying, but we lower the bar of expectation and power in prayer.

We kick like mad to keep our heads above water, all the while talking passively to an imagined God powerless to do most anything except give us the right perspective to make it through the day. We dwindle God down to a divine Being just as overwhelmed and powerless as we are, and our prayers to that God are understandably vague and infrequent.

⁹ Matthew 7:16

Constantly overwhelmed lives should drive us to prayer at its purest and most raw, but the tendency for many is to pray safe, calculated prayers insulating us from both disappointment and freedom.

2) Pray Because Trust Comes Before Faith

We fear silence. But the thing that calms that fear isn't faith, it's trust. Faith is the assurance of what you hope for.¹⁰ Trust is confidence in the character of God.

Before we can have faith that God will answer a given request, we simply have to learn to trust the character of the God we're talking to. In my experience, trying to will faith into the equation doesn't make the possibility of silence any less terrifying, but trusting the character of the listener certainly does. Trust allows us to say, "I don't understand what God is doing right now, but I trust that God is good."

What if I pray and the cancer doesn't disappear? Or I don't get the job? Or she doesn't come back? Or he's still addicted?

Without trust, we suppress the disappointment God's silence leaves with us. We build a wall to protect ourselves from the very God we pray to. We carefully nuance our prayers, guarding ourselves against allowing God to disappoint us like that a second time (we'll get deep into the weeds of unanswered prayer in chapter 10).

With trust, we can come to the God whose character doesn't seem to match his silence, saying with brutal honesty, "Where were you? How could you? What were you thinking?"

Jesus hasn't revealed a God we can perfectly understand, but he has revealed a God we can perfectly trust. Trust is the certainty that the listening God hears and cares. I trust the God who, even when he doesn't make the suffering go away, wears the suffering alongside me. Trusting the God revealed in Jesus means: silence is real, but it's not forever.

3) Pray Because Complaints Are Welcome

God isn't nearly as worried about your mixed motives as you are. I can prove it. Here's a few prayers that made the cut as part of the inspired, inerrant, canonical Scriptures:

"May burning coals fall on them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise." (Psalm 140:10)

"I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God." (Psalm 69:3)

"I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble." (Psalm 142:2)

Anger, depression, complaint. Whoever wrote those needs to see a professional.

David. That's who wrote those prayers. You've probably heard of David: ancient Israel's most famous figure, the king who set an unreachable bar for all subsequent kings, the man after God's own heart, the one whose bloodline was promised to lead to the Messiah. He's the psychotic nightmare who wrote those prayers. They were collected into the Psalms, which have framed Christian worship and prayer since before the church's inception.¹¹ Those prayers sit right alongside some of David's more revered poetry.

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:1

¹¹ David did not write all the Psalms; however he is the majority author and the author of the psalms selected in this example.

“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. (Psalm 23:1-3)

Well, apparently David wasn’t always that serene and balanced because he also prayed, *“May burning coals fall on them...”*¹²

“Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all of his benefits...who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” (Psalm 103:2, 5)

He mustn’t always have felt like God was spreading his wings because he also prayed, *“I am worn out calling for help...”*¹³

“Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.” (Psalm 145:2)

I guess that “every day” was hyperbolic because some days it wasn’t praise on his lips. *“I pour out before him my complaint...”*¹⁴

The Psalms reveal a garden variety of motives. Some of the words in those prayers go directly against the teachings of Jesus and the character of God (What happened to loving enemies and a God rich in love and loyal in faithfulness?¹⁵), meaning some of the Psalms are technically heretical. So why would those prayers be included in the Bible?

Because they’re honest. That’s what makes these psalms exemplary. God is looking for relationship, not well-prepared speeches spoken from perfect motives. God listened to overreacting rage, dramatic despair, and guileless joy, and he called David a man after his own heart. When it comes to prayer, God isn’t grading essays. He’s talking to children. So, if God can delight in prayers as dysfunctional as the ones we find wedged into the middle of the Bible, he can handle yours too without you cleaning them up first.

If the Bible tells us anything about how to pray, it says that God much prefers the rough draft full of rants and typos to the polished, edited version. C.S. Lewis said of prayer, *“Lay before him what is in us, not what ought be in us.”*¹⁶

The way your motives change isn’t by working them out in silence, it’s through such brutal honesty with God that he, by prayer, can refine your motives. Complaints are welcome.

4) Pray Because the Only Way to Get It Wrong Is by Trying to Get It Right

I find it so helpful that, when teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus included this line, right in the middle: *“Give us this day our daily bread.”*¹⁷

What a simple request! Bring your felt needs to God—the needs of this day—and talk to him about them. How do I pray? The most straightforward response is: talk to God about what’s on your mind. That’s it! You talk to God like a friend. You vent. You ask. You laugh. You listen. You unload. You just talk. You don’t try to sound more holy or pure or spiritual than you are. Prayer isn’t a noble monologue. It’s a free-flowing conversation, and the only way to get prayer wrong is to try to get it right.

¹² Psalm 140:10

¹³ Psalm 69:3

¹⁴ Psalm 142:2

¹⁵ Matthew 5:43-44, Exodus 34:6

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*

¹⁷ Matthew 6:11

In the wise words of Emory University Professor Roberta Bondi, “*If you are praying, you are already, ‘doing it right.’*”¹⁸

The Lord Is Near

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds...
(Philippians 4:5-7)

To our modern ears, that reads like it was written by someone who’s never really been anxious, someone who’s never been through what I’ve been through. That sounds like religious well-wishing. It’s just not that simple. If it’s that simple, why isn’t it working?

Most often, when this infamous passage is referenced, it starts with the command to rid oneself of anxiety. “*Do not be anxious about anything...*”¹⁹ But the passage doesn’t start there. Preceding the imperative is the statement of fact, “*The Lord is near.*”²⁰

The deep fear that robs our prayers of power is the lie that, “The Lord *isn’t* near.” The lie that God has forgotten me, that I’m not in good hands, that my future isn’t secure. It’s the worry that, at the end of the day, this God, near or far, can’t be trusted, that he’s something less than who he promises to be, and that—really when it comes down to it—I’m on my own.

All four Gospel authors remember Jesus flipping over the tables of the Temple’s money changers in a holy tantrum. He prophetically scrubbed the sacred Temple clean of the corruption staining the house of prayer. And in the midst of that rampage, with every eye on the rabbi-gone-mad, Jesus yelled through panted breaths, “*Stop turning my father’s house into a market!*”²¹ It wasn’t in a composed, well-prepared moment of prepared teaching but in the throes of righteous anger, speaking from the gut, not the head, that Jesus instinctively called the Temple, “*My Father’s House.*”²²

That’s significant because in 1st Century Israel, the Temple was the most revered building on earth. The Jewish people believed it was literally the house of Yahweh—the place where God’s presence dwelt. The house God lived in. There were cleansing rituals required just to cross the threshold, and restricted access the nearer you got the center. Even most priests couldn’t enter the innermost room because in ancient Hebrew spirituality, the Temple *was* the Presence of God. And Jesus is calling that very place “home.” In the presence of a God that made even the priests tense up, Jesus was at home.

Nancy Mairs profoundly observed, “*Who one believes God to be is most accurately revealed not in any credo but in the way one speaks to God when no one else is listening.*”²³

When you utter the words, “Dear God,” what’s the expression on the divine face you’re exchanging glances with? What’s going through God’s mind? What’s God’s mood?

Dear God: Sorry to bother you...

¹⁸ Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Check book’s bibliography for original source from RB)

¹⁹ Philippians 4:6

²⁰ Philippians 4:5

²¹ John 2:16

²² Ibid.

²³ Epigraph: Nancy Mairs, *Ordinary Time* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 54.

Dear God: I know you're really busy, but...

Dear God: I know I haven't stopped by in a while...

"*My Father's house...*"²⁴ That's a profoundly different starting place from which Jesus' prayers emerge. The one, simple assurance that fills our prayers with power is, "*The Lord is near.*"²⁵

"The most important discovery you will ever make is the love the Father has for you," writes Pete Greig, founder of the 24/7 Prayer Movement. "Your power in prayer will flow from the certainty that the one who made you likes you, he is not scowling at you, he is on your side. Unless our mission and our acts of mercy, our intercession, petition, confession, and spiritual warfare begin and end in the knowledge of the Father's love, we will act and pray out of desperation, determination, and duty instead of revelation, expectation, and joy."²⁶

The most important discovery you will ever make is the Father's love, and it's just that: a discovery. It cannot be taught. It has to be discovered, and everything else flows from that discovery.

I know that the moon is more than 200,000 miles away from the earth, and that it's more than a light, but a solid mass you can touch and walk on.²⁷ I know that, but Neil Armstrong has discovered it. He's traveled all those miles and walked on that glowing nightlight. That's a different experience entirely. Knowledge is hearsay. It's memorizing the facts. Discovery requires personal experience.

You can read the description of every entree on the menu, listen to the server's eloquent description of the few that draw your attention, and carefully watch the plates coming out, eyeing the reactions of restaurant patrons as they take the first bite. But none of it will satisfy your hunger. Until you pick up a fork and knife and taste for yourself, it's all just hearsay.

You can watch every rom-com ever produced. Read all the classic romance novels. Eavesdrop on the first date at the cafe table next to you. You can tear up at wedding ceremonies and admire the old couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary, but all of that is merely to know about love. To discover love, you must feel the first-date butterflies for yourself, tell the other how you feel with no guaranteed reciprocation, make vows in front of friends and family, and hold the wrinkled hand of your elderly spouse after decades of living out those vows through ordinary days and unexpected changes. True love requires personal experience.

When it comes to prayer, you can read all the classics, study the revival stories, and treasure up every biblical insight. You can memorize the facts. Or you could live daily in relationship to God through prayer, insist on processing the extraordinary, the devastating, and all the mundanity in the middle with the eagerly listening Father. Guess which method is more effective? Prayer is learned by discovery.

More Practice Than Theory

Jesus was asked, "*Teach us to pray.*"²⁸ And he started praying. That was his answer.

The modern father of spiritual discipline, Richard Foster, counsels, "*By praying, we learn to pray.*"²⁹

²⁴ John 2:16

²⁵ Philippians 4:5

²⁶ Pete Greig, *Dirty Glory*

²⁷ <https://moon.nasa.gov/about/in-depth/>

²⁸ Luke 11:1

²⁹ Richard Foster, *Prayer*

The contemplative Thomas Merton writes, “If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying.”³⁰

The spiritual giant Mother Teresa was once asked, “How do we learn to pray?” and responded simply, “By praying.”³¹

Prayer is more practice than theory, so let me offer a starting place, a borrowed phrase from Dom John Chapman, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t.”³²

If you can’t pray for an hour, great. Don’t try. It’ll feel like an eternity. Pray for a minute. “*Pray as you can, not as you can’t.*”³³

If you zone out every time you try to pray at home, pray while you’re running errands or exercising or walking down the sidewalk.

If you can’t concentrate to pray aloud, journal prayers with paper and pen.

If you can’t pray with hope and faith, God’s not bothered. He wants you to tell him about your doubt and disappointment.

If you can’t pray in phrases of praise and adoration, don’t fake it. Pray your complaints, your anger, or your confusion.

And if you’re more comfortable with cynicism than innocence, unsure about your motives, afraid of silence, afraid of an answer, or pretty confident you aren’t doing it right, you’re in the perfect starting place.

Pray as you *can*, and somewhere along the way, you will make the most important discovery of your life: the love the Father has for you. That discovery is God’s end of the deal. Your part is just to show up honestly. Show up, and keep showing up. That’s the one non-negotiable when it comes to prayer.

And that invitation is for everybody.

If you’ve never uttered a word of prayer, you should know that one humble request was enough for a career thief crucified next to Jesus to discover the Father’s love.

If prayer is the source of a deep wound or disappointment for you, remember that when trust is broken in a relationship, it doesn’t get healed by silence and distance. Healing requires the courage of re-engaging. I won’t pretend that’s easy. But it is the place of healing.

If you’re years into an active life of mature prayer and beginning to wonder what’s left to discover, remember that you’ll spend eternity in the presence of God and never reach the end of him. You’ll never lose a sense of wonder at his goodness, never grow bored in his presence, and never have him all figured out. There is an infinitum of discovery in this divine relationship.

Pray as you *can*.

That’s an invitation for everybody: The rookies, the jaded, the faithful, and everyone in between.

³⁰ Source in *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson

³¹ Locate source (Greig or Yancey)

³² Richard Foster, *Prayer* (Check bibliography for original source)

³³ Ibid.

New Year's Eve, 2018

One visit back to the old middle school wasn't enough for me. I had to go back. On New Year's Eve, I went out to dinner with my wife, and after dessert, I went for it, "You know where would be a romantic place to ring in the new year?"

I drove as fast as I could across a couple towns, back to the old middle school because I wanted to be circling it in prayer when the clock turned.

I went back, not because I thought if I did God would do what I wanted him to do.

I didn't go back because there's some kind of mystical power in lining God up with the numbers on our calendar.

I went back because that's where I wanted to be. I wanted to be with the Father.

And that night, again the only car in the otherwise empty parking lot, again walking my personal holy ground in prayer, I didn't become any more his son. God didn't love me more that night than he has any other night, and I didn't belong to him any more entirely than any other person out dancing and toasting champagne.

But, in a world that, for the most part, rejects him, ignores him, and chooses any distraction over him, imagine how much it must bless to the heart of the Father to say, "I want to be with you. I choose you, God, over every other option."

Prayer is about presence before it's about anything else. Prayer doesn't begin with outcomes. Prayer is the free choice to be with the Father, to prefer his company. In our desire for certain outcomes or our confusion over not getting certain outcomes, we are tempted to begin there. But we cannot brush past simply being with the Father and arrive at anything close to the sort of prayer Jesus won back for us. Prayer starts with presence.

So, there I am, walking around this school, the familiar prayer circle that's defined my life as Kirsten, mother to two little ones at the time, patiently works a breast pump in the idling car. What God started in me as a thirteen-year-old kid never stopped. Everything else in my life has changed, but this is constant: I spend the waking hours of the morning preferring the Father's presence. At thirteen, it was 6:30 AM at the school before the teachers even bothered showing up. At thirty-one, it was the rooftop of my Brooklyn apartment building that I acrobatically scale a fire escape with a cup of coffee in hand to access. Now at thirty-four, it's walking the pathway through Laurelhurst Park in the heart of Portland in the dark of the early morning with a quickly cooling mug of coffee in my right hand. Why? Because in spite of everything, I still prefer his presence to anything else. It's not the gritting your teeth, "Come on God, you owe me this" kind of prayer. It's being present to the One who chose me first and chooses me again today. It's the joy of my life.

And that New Year's night in particular, as the clock was turning and so was the calendar, and I was walking a path of prayer that symbolized so much for me, I could only get one prayer out through tears of passion and a quivering voice.

"Do it again, Lord."

"What I saw you do here in this ordinary place among ordinary people, do it again."

"Do it again, this time in Brooklyn."

"You haven't changed, so I'll keep asking. Do it again, Lord."

PRACTICE

Pray As You Can

Start where you are. Put down this book and talk to God. Talk to him about the little details of your life you're sure he doesn't care about. Talk to him about the ways he's let you down or disappointed you. Talk to him about the blessings heaped on you that you could never deserve. Talk to him about the anxiety you're carrying today. Just talk to him. Prayer is not the memorizing of facts or highlighting of key phrases. It's a relational discovery.

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