



Today

Sept/Oct 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

Prayer:
HEART TO HEART
WITH GOD

ALSO: IMAGES OF SALVATION

Friends:

The Heidelberg Catechism, a statement of faith dating back to the 16th-century Reformation, describes prayer as the most important part of our gratitude to God for his salvation. That's a deeply bold statement. In other words, prayer is more essential to the Christian life than obeying the Ten Commandments, loving mercy and doing justice, or going to church to worship. All these things are important, of course, but prayer is at the very root of our relationship with God.



Imagine setting your GPS to guide you—and then throwing it in the back of your car, not bothering to follow its guidance. We pray because we are easily distracted and need to seek God's guidance and wisdom and to follow his will.

This September, Peter Hoytema helps us see how vital prayer is to the Christian life. In prayer we seek the very heart of God.

Then, in October, George Young walks us through a range of biblical images pointing to salvation. What does it look like to be "saved"? The Bible offers many pictures, metaphors, and parables to describe God's grace and care for us.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Steven Koster". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "S" at the beginning.

—Steven Koster

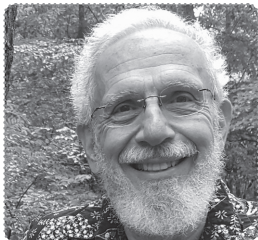
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**“Prayer: Heart to
Heart with God”
Peter Hoytema**



**“Images of Salvation”
George R. Young**

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ReFrame
Media

september

Prayer: Heart to Heart with God

Peter Hoytema

Few things apply more directly to everyday Christian living than prayer. To be a Christian is to pray. We experience the blessings of prayer in many ways. Prayer is how we speak to God, worship God, and respond to God's blessings. Prayer is instrumental in helping us grow as Christians, and it builds relationships with other people as we pray with and for each other. Prayer plays a key role in extending God's healing presence in a hurting world.

Prayer consists of a genuine encounter between us and God—one that God graciously initiates. No matter how familiar we may be with prayer, it's something we can all continue to learn about and practice. These devotions are written with the hope that when you pray, you experience a heart-to-heart connection with God that enriches and strengthens your walk with him. May these devotions encourage you to continue opening your heart to the God who has turned his heart of love toward you!

Peter Hoytema has been a pastor for nearly 30 years and has served congregations in Ontario and New Jersey. He is currently the pastor of a congregation in Strathroy, Ontario. He is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Grace, are the parents of four adult children.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
—Psalm 84:5

This month we are going to explore the mystery and majesty of prayer. At first we might think of prayer as mainly “communicating with God.” That’s a good start, but there’s much more to it.

At its core, prayer involves an ever-deepening relationship with God. Prayer cultivates a deep desire for God, the kind of longing for God that Psalm 84 expresses so well. Through prayer we are able to actually experience the presence of God.

In the Old Testament, God’s presence was most evident at the temple—the “courts of the LORD” poetically described in Psalm 84. The temple was God’s “dwelling place,” the destination of all who traveled on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Notice that the psalmist describes people whose “*hearts* are set on pilgrimage.” This

highlights the essence of prayer and the beauty of how we as New Testament believers experience God’s presence today. Because Jesus has paid the price for our sin and has opened the way for us into God’s presence, God is now present with his people through his Holy Spirit living in us. As a result, every Christian is now a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). So we can experience God’s presence through prayer anywhere and at any time. God has come to us. He is as close as our own hearts. To meet with God and grow closer to him, all we need to do is approach him in prayer.

Thank you, Lord, for the incredible gift of prayer. Make our hearts your dwelling place, filling us with your presence and guiding us always. Amen.

PREPARING TO PRAY

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in. . . .

—Revelation 3:20

Here is the amazing reality of prayer: It exists because God wants to have a relationship with you. Prayer begins with God moving your heart to seek his heart. We don't initiate prayer; God does. This means that our prayers are always responses to God's promptings.

The scene in today's Bible reading portrays this fact beautifully. By knocking on the door to our hearts, the Lord invites us to enjoy a deep, lasting friendship with him. We would never have known that Jesus was at our doorstep without his knocking at the door.

The fact that prayer is a response to God's initiatives is reassuring. But this should also motivate us, when possible, to spend time preparing to pray before actually doing it. It need not be long, but some recognition of God's grace, the ground

of all prayer, is a good way to begin. Before we speak, we should listen to the voice that calls to us. Before knocking on God's door, we should hear God knocking on ours. When we prepare to pray, we gratefully acknowledge that what we are about to do has originated in the heart of God.

So before you pray, bow before its mystery. Savor the Lord's grace and love. Then open the door.

Lord God, how often I rush into prayer without realizing what an incredible gift it is. Slow me down, Lord. Make me aware of your grace and love as I come to you in prayer. Amen.

THE TURN OF THE HEART

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives. . . .
—James 4:3

Prayer connects our heart with God's heart. For many people, the word *heart* represents only their emotions, especially feelings like love, sadness, and hope. It's in the *mind* that logic resides, many will say. The heart is for feeling and the brain is for thinking, and the two are often pitted against each other.

The Bible teaches, however, that the heart is the center of every aspect of being human: our reason, our emotions, and our will. The heart directs our affections, shapes our decision making, and determines our ultimate allegiances. This is why Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Today's Bible reading contains a harsh rebuke of people whose hearts have turned away from God. It affects all their think-

ing, decision making, motives, emotions, and behaviors. The spiritual fallout of a broken relationship with God is that prayer is rendered ineffective.

But nestled in this passage are words of hope. No matter how far our hearts may wander from God, he promises to be near when we turn to him. That's because he is always near and caring for us (see Matthew 28:20; Philippians 4:4-6). One renewing encounter with God can change everything. And it's always just one prayer away.

Lord, thank you for always being near. Help me not to wander or turn my heart away from you. Purify my heart so that I may treasure and follow only you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE TRINITY AND PRAYER

I kneel before the Father. . . . I pray that . . . he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit . . . so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.
—Ephesians 3:14-17

Christians believe that the one God exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our minds cannot sort out all the complexities of this mystery, but prayer is a wonderful way for the mystery of the Trinity to find application in our lives.

A basic understanding of prayer is that it involves all three persons of the Trinity. We pray *to* the Father, *in* the name of Jesus, *by* the power of the Holy Spirit.

What this means is something really amazing. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live together in loving harmony, each one glorifying and supporting the others. And when we pray, the three persons of the Trinity also graciously include and support us. Our prayers connect us with the interchange of God's love and amazing work in this world.

Here's a picture of what that looks like: When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him *as he was praying*, and the Father said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22). When we pray, we participate in the same self-effacing love that unites the Trinity. The love of God is extended to all who have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). We pray because we too are the beloved children of God with whom he is pleased!

As I pray to you, Father, in the name of Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, I thank you for giving me your love. Help me to share your love with others. Amen.

TALKING TO OUR ABBA

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. . . . And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." —Romans 8:14-15

As we reflect on how the Trinity shapes our understanding and practice of prayer, let's consider what it means to call God *Abba*. *Abba* is the Aramaic word for "father." Jesus spoke Aramaic, and *Abba* was perhaps one of the first words he learned as a child. The equivalent of *Abba* in English and several other languages would be "Dada," "Daddy," or "Papa."

Jesus, the Son of God, referred to his Father this way in prayer (Mark 14:36), and that should not surprise us. What's truly incredible is that we may also speak to God this way. As Romans 8 puts it, by the Spirit of God we cry, "*Abba*."

This name for God assures us of God's loving attentiveness to our prayers. It conveys both the tenderness and security of our relationship with God, our heavenly Father.

It's interesting that the one time the Bible records Jesus calling his Father *Abba* in prayer is on the night before he died. Frightened and alone, Jesus cried out to his *Abba*. The writer of Hebrews probably had this episode in mind when he wrote that Jesus prayed "with fervent cries and tears" and that "he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Hebrews 5:7). The Father heard the Son.

Because of the Lord's obedience, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the one whom Jesus called *Abba* is our *Abba* too.

Abba, Father, it's wonderful to know that I am your child. Thank you for loving me and for promising to hear me when I pray. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

WITHIN GOD'S WILL, IN THE NAME OF JESUS

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. —1 John 5:14

Today let's focus on what it means to ask within God's will. We'll look at some important ways this affects not only *what* we ask for but also *how* we ask—and all this connects with asking in the name of Jesus.

First, Jesus taught, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and "Whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you" (John 14:6; 15:16). This means that by recognizing Jesus' authority as the Son of God, we can pray in his name and have access to God the Father almighty. Jesus, who died for our sins in order to reconcile us with God (Rom. 5:6-11), is the only reason we have access to the Father in prayer.

Second, our prayers are based on what Jesus has done for us, not on anything we have done. Jesus' name identifies him as the one who saved "his peo-

ple from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). So to ask in the name of Jesus is to acknowledge that Jesus is our Savior, who always intercedes for us (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Finally, in everything he did, Jesus wanted to do God's will and bring him glory (John 6:38-40; 12:26-28). Jesus' example is the pattern for everything we do. So asking in Jesus' name means we want to do God's will and to glorify God (see John 14:13). And to these requests God will always say yes.

Lord Jesus, one and only Savior, I trust the power and authority of your name. Help me to follow your example, praying and living by God's will in all I do, through the work of your Spirit in me. In your name, Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PRAYER

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. —Romans 8:26

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul explains that believers have a weakness when it comes to prayer. This involves much more than simply neglecting prayer or praying with wrong motives. Our weakness runs much deeper.

The best way to understand it is to compare it to the work the Spirit does to help us. We need the Holy Spirit to pray on our behalf because “we do not know what we ought to pray for.”

This does not mean we never know what to pray for. Many of us have long lists of valid prayer concerns. Our weakness, though, is that we do not understand how the things we pray for fit into the mysterious, sovereign will of God. It's best understood as a spiritual disability.

So, as Paul describes it, “the Spirit intercedes for God's people *in accordance with the*

will of God.” Though there is much we do not understand, the Spirit understands completely. The Spirit situates the weakness of our prayers within the strength of God's intentions. Our broken prayers are taken up and incorporated into divine purposes that we know nothing about.

We can trust the mystery of prayer! God is at work. As we pray, the Spirit is also praying. There is much we do not know, but we can know this: “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

Thank you, Lord, for strengthening the weakness of my prayers by the power of the Holy Spirit. As I pray to you, help me to trust your good will for my life and for all the concerns I pray about. Amen.

THE PRAYER LIFE OF JESUS

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." —Luke 11:1

Have you ever wondered why Jesus prayed? As Luke 5:16 informs us, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." The Lord's passion for prayer may surprise us. He is God; why would he need to pray at all?

The gospels record Jesus praying at key moments in his ministry. First, remember that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness "after fasting forty days and forty nights" (Matthew 4:2). Prayer is not mentioned here, but since prayer and fasting are often connected in the Bible, it's safe to assume that Jesus prayed intensely to prepare for the temptations that would follow.

In addition, Jesus chose his twelve disciples after he "spent the night praying to God" (Luke 6:12). Through prayer, he was guided by the Spirit to choose his closest followers. In Luke 11 we read that one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them

to pray just after he had finished praying. In response, he taught them the prayer we know today as the Lord's Prayer (see also Matthew 6:9-13).

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed as never before, earnestly wrestling with God. Our Lord's submission to death on a cross for our sake, obeying the will of his Father, was the fruit of that prayerful struggle.

Through prayer Jesus received strength, discernment, instruction, and obedience. The bottom line is this: if Jesus needed to pray, how much more do we?

Thank you, Jesus, for showing how important it is to pray. Help us to follow your example. Thank you for giving us prayer so that we grow closer to you. In your name, Amen.

PRAISE, HONOR, ADORATION

Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
—Psalm 103:1

Let's look at some of the types of prayer Jesus shows us in the Lord's Prayer. The place to begin is with praise, honor, and adoration in prayer.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name" (Luke 11:2), recognizing God's character of being holy, majestic, all-powerful, sovereign over all things, and the source of true wisdom and love. It's important to remember that prayer should begin with praising and honoring God, recognizing all that God is and all that God has done for us. This is often called adoration of God. Too often in prayer, before we give God glory and honor, we ask God to give us something or to do something for us or for our loved ones.

The prayer of adoration is something we must practice. It can take some effort on our part, but, as with many things,

the more we practice adoring God, the easier it gets. And we can begin by simply praying verses of Scripture that show us how awesome God is.

We can read a passage like Psalm 103 out loud, for example. As we prayerfully say these verses about God's greatness, it doesn't take long before we begin to actually experience the glory of God. Our prayer moves from talking *to* God to enjoying the presence *of* God.

So before we ask God to do something, let's first give God the glory due his name!

Lord, you are perfect, holy, majestic, and worthy of all our praise. Help us to focus on your glory, faithfulness, and love as we bring our requests to you. Amen.

THANKSGIVING, GRATITUDE

Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.
—Psalm 66:16

Quite often, we are led to give thanks after giving honor and adoration to God in our prayers. We give thanks for the amazing things God has done—for this world, for his people, and for us in our personal lives.

Notice how Psalm 66 moves from adoration to thanksgiving. In the first four verses the psalmist declares how awesome and glorious God is. Then in verse 5 we see a transition to “come and see what God has done.” From this point on, the psalm reads like an inventory of God’s gifts and amazing help. The psalmist describes how God saves and watches over his people, even in the context of trouble and disappointment, and the psalmist shares what God has done for him personally as well.

Psalm 66 teaches us the value of being specific when we give

thanks to God. Many people like to keep a prayer journal that helps them pay attention to what God is doing in their lives. They keep a running list of God’s blessings and work for them, and they review their list in thanksgiving to God.

In our prayer life, gratitude can grow in many ways. God is incredibly gracious and generous. As we read in James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father. . . .” The one who gives so abundantly is most worthy to receive our abundant thanks.

Lord, how I can ever thank you enough for all the blessings I receive from you? Help me to be thankful and to use your gifts to enrich the lives of others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

LAMENT

How long, LORD? Will you be angry forever? . . . Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name. . . . —Psalm 79:5, 9

Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2), and this reminds us that the world we live in needs the refreshing goodness and wholeness of God’s kingdom. As we recognize that the world is profoundly broken, we know that its ultimate healing will occur only when the fullness of God’s kingdom has finally come.

Today, millions of people recall the terrorist attacks that took place in the United States 17 years ago. The events of 9/11 and all other examples of violence, injustice, and suffering bring us to lament. In desperation we cry out, “How long, LORD?” We implore God to do something, to punish evildoers and to defend all who suffer as innocent victims.

We also go a step further in our lament. We remind God of the promises he has made, and we dare to call him to account to

keep those promises, in line with his character. We cry out to the God who is all powerful and who in divine humility permits us to speak with such boldness in prayer.

That’s what we do when we pray, “Your kingdom come.”

If you are hurting, or if the brokenness of the world has moved you to lament, take heart. Prayers of lament are also prayers of hope as we anticipate the completion of God’s kingdom promises. Our prayers play an important role in the coming of his kingdom!

Lord, the pain of life in this broken world leads us to cry out to you for help. Lord, heal our hurts. Lord, bring your kingdom. Lord, be our peace. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

SUBMISSION

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
—Matthew 26:39

In connection with praying "Your kingdom come," Jesus taught us to say, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

As we have noted earlier, we can sometimes feel uncertain whether the things we pray for are in line with God's will. Or perhaps we might think that our confidence is somehow diminished if we say, ". . . if it be your will" as we pray.

While God's will is deeply mysterious, there is also something very reassuring about it. Praying "your will be done" does not mean we fully understand God's will. This is mostly a prayer that expresses our desire to do God's will. And that is a prayer of strong conviction. It conveys our trust in the goodness of God's will and our assurance that God will carry out his purposes. And, remember, praying within God's will is

about following Jesus' example (see Sept. 6).

Today's Bible reading shows that even Jesus wrestled with his Father's will and submitted to it. The result of that prayerful struggle was that Jesus could say with firm resolve, "Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" His connection with the Father was the source of his strength.

A book about prayer that I have grown to appreciate has an interesting title. It's called *Yielding*. There is nothing weak about submitting to God. Yielding to God's will is the very thing that strengthens us.

Lord, sometimes your will seems confusing; guide us to pray like Jesus. Help us to trust you, love you, and obey you. May your will be done in our lives. Amen.

PETITION

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."
—Matthew 7:7

One of the most amazing things about prayer is that the Creator of the universe wants us to ask him to do things for us. We would never think of asking a prime minister or president to do a favor for us. Yet God not only lets us do that; he also encourages and even commands that we do it.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). That little word "give" seems out of place in the Lord's Prayer, doesn't it? After all, who are we to tell God what to do? So far, the Lord's Prayer has focused entirely on God. We've prayed about honoring the Father's name and seeking his kingdom and will. How is it that we can now instruct God to pay attention to us?

The answer to this question is in the amazing grace and humility that dwell in God's heart. God wants to have a close relation-

ship with us. He wants to take care of our daily needs, and he wants us to know that we can approach him with confidence.

God wants us to know that because we rely on him for everything, and because he promises to care for us, we can ask him for all that we need—and that can range from things like amazing miracles to ordinary food like daily bread.

The King of heaven has turned his heart of love toward you. Looking at Jesus' example and knowing the promises God has made, what will you ask him for today?

Thank you, Lord, for your abundant blessings. Help me to share them generously with others so they too can know your love. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

WHEN GOD SAYS NO

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you. . . ."

—2 Corinthians 12:8-9

It is not always easy to understand God's answers to our prayers. But we can be assured that he is always listening to us and that he wants what is best for us.

Sometimes, when it seems God is saying no to something, he may be saying yes to something else and leading us in a way that is different from our own plans.

Sometimes we do not receive what we pray for because we are not ready for it. So God's answer may be more like "Yes, but not now." In cases like that, we need to persist in prayer, but we should also ask for patience as we submit to God's timing.

Other times God simply says no because what we are praying for is not in line with his will and what is best for us. God can decide not to give us something because he may

have something else in mind for us—something greater than we can even ask or imagine (see Ephesians 3:20).

So we must pray to God with humility and trust. We might think that we know what's best for us and that our timing makes more sense than God's timing. But then we would be elevating ourselves above the God we pray to! As the Lord said to Paul when his prayer was declined, "My grace is sufficient for you." In this way God reminds us that all our needs are met in Christ, and this allows us to pray, wait, and trust.

Lord, forgive me for thinking I have everything figured out. Help me to submit to you and trust in you. Thank you for your grace. It truly is all I need. Amen.

THE PEACE OF GOD

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:7

The peace of God described in today's reading is one of the many blessings God promises his people who pray.

Occasionally we hear people talk about having "inner peace," and we can get the impression that inner peace is a personal-ity trait that some people who are calm by nature have more than others. Other times, inner peace is described as something people can develop by following a pattern of relaxing meditation techniques.

But the kind of peace Paul describes is very different. It's not something only a few people can experience; it's a gift that everyone can receive. And when Paul says this peace "transcends all understanding," he indicates that it is not something we can produce by our own efforts.

Paul is describing the peace that comes from God and that

guards troubled hearts. The word translated as "guard" here is a strong military term. It refers to the close supervision a Roman soldier would have over someone entrusted to his care. In fact, in Paul's day prisoners were often chained to the Roman guards assigned to watch over them.

The picture in this verse is compelling. Our prayers connect us directly to God. The best inner peace is the kind that God alone can provide. If your heart needs that peace, ask God to give it to you. He will surely do it.

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving me your peace. Thank you for assuring me that I am always protected by the power of your love. In your strong name I pray. Amen.

PEACE OVERFLOWING

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. . . .
—Acts 16:25

Driving home from the Toronto airport one evening in January, I knew I had to be careful. A January thaw had settled in, but the weather was turning quickly. The forecast called for precipitation, and in the cooling temperatures that could bring a mix of snow and freezing rain.

Driving in those conditions can be stressful. But one thing that helped me was a gauge on my dashboard showing the temperature outside. Knowing that the temperature remained above freezing assured me that ice was not forming on the roads.

That gave me a helpful way to think about prayer. What we know on the inside can affect the way we deal with situations on the outside. In today's Bible reading, for example, we see Paul and Silas overflowing with the peace of God even though they had been severely beaten,

put in stocks, and imprisoned. And through them, the other prisoners were hearing about the amazing love and power of the Lord.

Then God did some amazing things, opening up the prison and loosening everyone's chains. What's more, the jailer and his household came to faith and new life in Jesus!

In our difficult situations, the peace of God can fill us and overflow into the lives of others too. In prayer, we connect with and grow closer to God, who has all the power in heaven and earth at his command. Imagine what God can do in response to our prayers!

Lord, when life is hard,
praying can be difficult.
For all who are hurting,
I ask that you fill their
hearts with peace. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

*Have mercy on me, O God. . . . For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.* —Psalm 51:1, 3

I recall someone asking me, a number of years ago, why we needed to have a prayer of confession in our worship services. He thought the confession of sin diminished the joy of worship, and he didn't see why forgiven sinners needed to keep asking God to forgive them.

The short answer to this question can be found in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). If the prayer that Jesus taught us includes a plea of confession, then clearly believers need to ask for forgiveness regularly. And since the confession of sin in the Lord's Prayer involves our relationships with others, it makes sense to pray this together, as a community of believers who receive and extend forgiveness.

Confession does convey the depressing reality of sin's impact on our lives. In Psalm 51, David is overwhelmed with guilt as he is made aware of his sin. His anguish moves him to repentance.

But notice that this psalm is also joyful as David anticipates praising the God who forgives. Prayers of confession are gateways to joy!

Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins," is the one by whom those sins are forgiven. Praise the Lord!

Lord, I am sorry for all the things I have done to hurt you and others. Forgive me, I pray. Thank you for restoring in me the joy of your salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS OUR INTERCESSOR

After he had dismissed them, [Jesus] went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.
—Matthew 14:23

The Bible shows us that Jesus speaks to the Father on our behalf. Romans 8:34 says that Jesus “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” In 1 John 2:1 we read that Jesus is our “advocate with the Father,” and from Hebrews 7:25 we learn that Jesus “always lives to intercede” for us.

What this intercession looks like is depicted in our reading for today. At first, this passage may raise some questions in our minds. Why would Jesus send his disciples out on the lake to struggle against a prevailing wind? And why, after leaving them alone for the night, would he go out to walk on the water just before dawn?

When we are in a struggle of some kind, even if it's just an annoying wind, we tend to ask God, “Why?”

There are no easy answers to our questions about struggles,

but the image of Jesus praying while his disciples are struggling should encourage us. It assures us that even though we may feel alone, God has not abandoned us. Jesus came to this world to share our trouble and to defeat the powers that are too strong for us to conquer. He still walks on the churning waters of life that can frighten us so! He has come to be with us in power and with love. In heaven, ruling over all things today, Jesus sees us. Through his Spirit he is with us, and he is praying for us.

Lord, when I feel I am struggling alone, help me to know that you are with me and that you are praying for me. Use me also to share this comfort with others. In your name, Amen.

OUR PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. . . . —Philippians 1:3-4

Yesterday we reflected on the fact that Jesus intercedes for us, and that encourages us to intercede for others. As we pray for others, we lift them up to God, asking that in Jesus' name God's blessings pour into their lives.

As we pray for others, it's important to know that our requests are not limited by time and space. In today's passage we read Paul's beautiful prayer for the Philippians. Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this letter. He was hundreds of miles away from Philippi, but that did not prevent him from asking God to fill the lives of his fellow believers there with the power of spiritual blessing.

When we pray for others, we ask God to pour out his resources on them, showering them with his limitless love and grace. It's because we recognize our own limitations that we ask

God to do for others what we are powerless to do ourselves.

Intercessory prayer demonstrates our love for others. We forget ourselves in prayer and seek God's best for others—even those whom we consider our enemies.

One of the kindest, most powerful things someone can ever say to us is "I'm praying for you." It means they want us to thrive in ways that only God can accomplish.

Whom is the Lord leading you to pray for today?

Thank you, Lord, for putting people in my life who pray for me. You bless and strengthen me by their prayers. Help me to pray for others too. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. . . . Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

—Ephesians 6:10, 18

Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13). If this seems confusing, making you wonder who is doing the tempting, be assured that God “does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13). These words in Jesus’ prayer mean, “Do not bring us to times of trial . . .” and “Protect us when we are tempted. . . .” (See also Psalm 31:3-4.)

Temptation is the work of the devil, Satan. We read in Matthew 4:1 that when Jesus was in the wilderness, he was “tempted by the devil.” But it’s important to note that in the same verse we find that Jesus was “led by the Spirit into the wilderness.”

The activity of Satan and the Holy Spirit here can seem confusing, but here’s a helpful way to look at it. Satan tempts, but God tests. When we are tempt-

ed, the only way we can pass the test of temptation is by recognizing our weakness and leaning on the Lord’s strength.

This is why prayer is such an important weapon in spiritual warfare. We are defenseless without it. Through prayer we remain connected with God, who equips us for battle and enables us to resist temptation. The Lord who conquered sin shares his victory with us! The power of sin has been defeated by the One who has delivered us from evil, and he is also the One who has taught us to pray.

Lord, I am powerless to resist temptation apart from you. Thank you for being my strength, my wisdom, and my deliverer. Keep me faithful in prayer. Amen.

MAKING PRAYER A HABIT

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

—Colossians 4:2

Most of us realize that prayer is important, but we often struggle to make it a priority. Busy work schedules, the distractions of technology, and the demands of daily life can make it difficult to set aside time for prayer. How can we be more successful in devoting ourselves to prayer?

Some people find that praying at set times in the day is helpful. I read about someone who set an alarm on her watch several times a day to remind herself to pray. She was surprised to find that after doing this for a while she no longer needed the alarm to remind her. What began as a regimented routine soon became a cherished habit.

Many people find it helpful to read prayers that others have written. Did you know that the book of Psalms is sometimes called “the prayer book of God’s people”? For many of us, read-

ing the Psalms or other prayers recorded in the Bible has energized our devotional life.

Then there is the value of praying with others. Gathering with other believers for prayer and fellowship is a great way to build one another up and grow closer together in the Lord.

God is pleased with every effort we make to devote ourselves to prayer. The creator of the universe wants to spend time with us, and he loves to hear from us. That thought alone can inspire us to make prayer a greater priority!

Lord, help me to be devoted to prayer. Help me to connect with you in whatever way I can. Use me to help others grow in prayer as well. In Jesus, Amen.

TALKING THINGS OUT WITH GOD

"We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."
—Luke 24:21

The encounter between Jesus and the disciples from Emmaus has much to teach us about prayer. The day Jesus rose from the dead was the most glorious day in history. But later that day, the risen Lord assumed the role of an anonymous traveling companion. It's striking that the Lord of glory would so humbly seek out two discouraged individuals.

This assures us that when we feel abandoned by God, he is still present with us. Perhaps we don't recognize God's presence because a difficult situation has taken up all of our attention. But God is with us nonetheless.

Consider too how patient Jesus is as the two disciples talk about the events that took place in Jerusalem over the past few days. As if Jesus didn't know these details! Sometimes in our prayers we pour out everything

in our hearts to God. And God listens! But it's not as though we are telling God anything he's not aware of. He simply lets us express ourselves. God is incredibly interested in hearing all we have to say.

When Jesus finally revealed his identity to the two disciples at Emmaus, they were filled with joy. It's the joy we feel when we realize that God is walking with us, listening to us, and sharing his time with us. The Lord who has come to us with humility and grace is the one to whom we can always pray.

Thank you, Lord, for always being with me. Thank you for being so interested in hearing my prayers. When I walk with people who are hurting, help me to lead them to you. Amen.

UNCEASING PRAYER

Pray continually. . .

—1 Thessalonians 5:17

How can a person “pray continually”? Is that possible?

At first we might think this command means we should be kneeling or bowing our heads and praying with our eyes closed 24/7. But thinking of prayer only in terms of certain actions or postures can really limit our understanding. Prayer is so much more!

We’ve been looking at prayer this month as a matter of the heart. This means prayer is not an activity that is different from all the other things we do. It’s directly connected to every aspect of our lives, for the enjoyment and the deepening of our relationship with God.

Many years after the writer Flannery O’Connor died, some of her prayers were published in a book titled *A Prayer Journal*. Her prayers in that book beautifully express her desire to love

God and to think about God all the time. Like many of us, O’Connor also chided herself for neglecting prayer. But even her frustrations with prayer were a way of praying!

Any time that we think about or are made aware of God and are moved to respond, we engage in prayer. As someone said, “You can always have a word with God.” That can happen when we enjoy God’s presence or when we crave it; it can happen in momentary bursts of gratitude, sporadic intercession, and silent desire. Continual prayer is the steady beat of a heart turned toward God.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us so many different ways to pray. Keep us close to you, in Jesus. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER

In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. —Psalm 5:3

At one place in his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis suggests that each morning starts the same way for everyone. When we wake up, thoughts about what we hope to accomplish that day flood our mind. Lewis writes that our plans for the day resemble wild animals that rush toward us.

I don't know if this describes how a day typically begins for you. But Lewis goes on to describe something that everyone should experience each morning. He encourages us to pay attention to another reality: the deeper life we have in Jesus Christ. Instead of fretting over the concerns of the new day, we should allow God's peace to flow into us.

That sounds like a wonderful description of morning prayer. It's what Psalm 5 describes as being a two-way conversation between us and God. We speak,

and we listen. We pray, and we wait. We act, and we receive. We begin the day with God.

Morning prayer sets the tone for the day that follows. If the morning begins with worry, that will only increase as the day moves along. But if we start out by enjoying time with God and receiving strength from God, we will more likely remain in his peace as the day continues. There's no better way to begin the day than with prayer.

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of this day. Help me to begin each day with you in prayer. As I pray to you, thank you for giving me the strength and peace I need. In Jesus, Amen.

EVENING PRAYER

Into your hands I commit my spirit.

—Psalm 31:5

Yesterday we reflected on the importance of starting each day with prayer. Today we'll look at how valuable it is to pray at the end of the day.

Evening prayer has a dual focus. On the one hand, we look back on the events of the day with gratitude and confession. We thank God for his abundant goodness, and we ask forgiveness for the sins we have committed that day.

On the other hand, we look ahead to the nighttime and ask God to protect us as we sleep. As we recognize our vulnerability and dependence on God, we entrust ourselves to his watchful care: "He who watches over you will not slumber" (Psalm 121:3).

Psalm 31 includes both of these elements. Here we find a prayer for deliverance as well as an expression of trust. It's

been said that the words "Into your hands I commit my spirit" served as a bedtime prayer that Jewish parents taught their children. It's the prayer Jesus spoke just before dying on the cross (Luke 23:46). As he closed his eyes in the sleep of death, he placed his trust in God.

Because of Jesus, we have the assurance of forgiveness and the certainty of God's watchful love. So before you sleep, talk to the Lord. Thank him for his grace, and place your fragile life in his strong hands.

At the end of the day I pray to you, Lord. Thank you for taking care of me and forgiving me. You are my God, and I am your child. I trust in you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

SILENT PRAYER

"Be still, and know that I am God."

—Psalm 46:10

We might think of "silent prayer" as communicating with God not by speaking words aloud but by saying them in our minds. But prayer does not always require words. In fact, Jesus cautioned that using "many words" in prayer could become like babbling (see Matthew 6:7).

Being still, without using words, can help us reflect on the majesty, power, beauty, love, and other characteristics of God. We need to be clear, though, that this is different from meditation that views silence as a way to empty the mind of thoughts and to connect with one's "inner self." The command to "be still" in Psalm 46 has nothing to do with that—and is actually the opposite.

Notice that the words "be still" in verse 10 are immediately followed by the instruction to know God. Prayer helps us grow in our knowledge of God,

and knowing the heart of God is what enables us to be still in his presence. As Psalm 46 indicates, God is both powerful and kind. Our troubled hearts are quieted when we find our refuge in him.

Some Bible versions include the Hebrew word *Selah* after verses 3, 7, and 11 in Psalm 46, and that may help us understand this point. Scholars aren't sure what *Selah* means, but it seems to signal a pause and perhaps a time of reflection.

Practice being silent in God's presence. Quiet reflection intensifies prayer as the mind is filled with thoughts of God.

Lord, thank you for enabling me to be still in your presence. You are my strength, and I trust in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PRAYER AS SELF-TALK

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God. . . .*

—Psalm 42:5

A news article reported the frightening experience a woman had as she spent a day with friends on a boat. She was tossed overboard when the boat hit a large wave. At first, she didn't think this was dangerous. She thought the boat could easily circle back to pick her up.

But this occurred late in the day, as the sun was setting. The low-angle sunlight was reflected by every wave, making it nearly impossible for searchers to spot her. Then a stiff wind, combined with the sounds of other boats, muffled her cries for help.

As night quickly fell, she knew that her only hope was to swim to a nearby island, and she was eventually rescued from there. The article reported that as she swam, she did two things: she pleaded with Jesus to help her,

and she told herself repeatedly that she was going to survive.

That sounds similar to what the writer is doing in Psalm 42. As he prays earnestly to God, he also tells himself to put his hope in God. Sometimes prayer includes this kind of self-talk. As we plead with God, we preach to ourselves.

When you pray, tell yourself to believe and trust in God! Sometimes we need to hear the gospel spoken to us by the sound of our own voice.

Lord, when I am struggling, reassure me that you are with me and will bring me through. Help me to remind myself that my hope is in you. Strengthen my faith and resolve, in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE ASSURANCE OF PRAYER

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.
—Isaiah 55:6

A number of studies have tried to search out the benefits of prayer. Results often indicate that people who pray are generally happier and healthier than people who don't. This may help people to consider praying more. And people who do pray know that the benefits of prayer extend far beyond their health and their sense of happiness.

As we have noted this month, prayer is ultimately about a relationship we have with God. I am reminded of a definition of prayer that I found in an old book some years ago: "Prayer is a cumulative life of friendship with God."

Just as a friendship involves and affects two people as they interact, so does our relationship with God. Today's Bible reading makes this clear. On the one hand, we are instructed to seek God, which seems to

imply that prayer happens by our initiative. But our seeking of God is only possible because God first says, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters." God calls, and we answer. Prayer is our enjoyment of a banquet already prepared by God. We pray not because we must, but because we may.

As we turn to the Lord, we find the One who has already turned to us in mercy and who freely pardons. This is the assurance of prayer—and also its greatest blessing.

Because you have first sought me, I seek you, O Lord. Because you have called to me, I call to you. Thank you for the amazing relationship I can have with you, through Jesus. Amen.

DEVELOPING A PASSION FOR PRAYER

We have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will. —Colossians 1:9

Earlier this month, as we reflected on the prayer life of Jesus, we noted how often he engaged in prayer. The Lord's passion for prayer is something he wants us to have as well. In one of his parables Jesus taught that we "should always pray and not give up" (see Luke 18:1).

Prayer was obviously a high priority for the apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Colossians. Some of the most beautiful prayers ever written are found in his letters. Paul's prayers are magnificent, not only because of their content but also because he was so diligent in prayer. He prayed "continually" for others and always thanked God for them.

Perhaps this leads you to consider how important prayer is in your life. Sometimes we think prayer is a gift that some believers have more than

others. Sometimes people who become known for having a passion for prayer are even called "prayer warriors."

It's true that some people are simply more interested in prayer than others. But God wants prayer to be a top priority in everyone's life. God wants us to experience prayer as a delight, not a duty.

Perhaps one of the things we should pray about most is prayer itself. If you ask God to help make prayer more of a priority in your life, how do you think he will respond? Of course he will say yes!

Lord, I know that prayer is always a blessing, but it's easy for me to neglect it. Please increase my desire and my opportunities to spend time with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE END OF PRAYER

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor. . . . Yours, LORD, is the kingdom. . . .
—1 Chronicles 29:11

Here, at the end of this month, we have reached the end of our reflections on prayer. This reminds me that the word *end* can have two meanings. It can mean that something has stopped, and it can also refer to a main purpose.

So let's consider the end of prayer. The traditional conclusion to the Lord's Prayer, as prayed by the church for many hundreds of years, goes like this: "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." This expresses the focus of prayer and the goal of our lives. As in life, the purpose of prayer is to keep us centered on God—to have our heart turned to the One who has first turned his heart toward us.

This is what David prayed for shortly before he died. He acknowledged that God alone is

King. He prayed that the desire to serve God would always be found in people's hearts. His prayer at the end of his life conveys what the end—the main purpose—of our lives should be: the glory of God.

So by our prayers and in our lives, let us acknowledge God's glory. Let us seek the peace and justice of his kingdom and submit to God's greatness. Let us pray that God will use even us to spread his glory everywhere until his kingdom has finally come!

Lord, "yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever"! Thank you for the assurance that guides my prayer and strengthens my life. May I dedicate my whole being to you, now and forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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