



Introduction

The Prayer We Long For

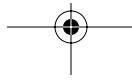
“Prayer lives among us as a wraith of what it was.”

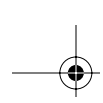
KARL RAHNER



Questions. Our lives are filled with them. And many of them, particularly the ones we ask of God, go unanswered. It's not that they are unimportant to him; they are *terribly* important to him. It's just that *we* are even more important, and he is waiting for us to ask the right ones. The New Testament is filled with such misdirected requests—“Show us the Father,” “Save us!” and “Who among us is the greatest?”—that Jesus declines to answer, opting instead to reveal more intimate, more significant insight into the character of God.

But one question was answered—immediately, clearly and with care.





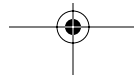
“Teach us to pray!” (Luke 11:1).

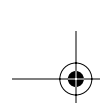
They’d finally asked the right question.

The breath of spiritual life is prayer. Physically, we can live forty days without food and three days without water, but only seconds without breathing. Spiritually, we can do no better. A life without prayer cannot be spiritually alive, no matter what else may be present. It is, as Evelyn Underhill has written, “breathing the air of eternity.” This is how strategic and critical prayer is for anyone who desires to be in a personal relationship with the living God.

And there is a *specific* prayer God wants to hear and we most need to express. It is not the prayer that makes us feel a certain way or that attempts to gain a particular advantage. It is the prayer that seeks out God and then experiences him. This experience is supernatural and, yes, mystical, but not in the way most would think. When we pray, we open the inner recesses of our life to the stirrings of God. There his transformational energies are released, and Spirit encounters spirit. As Moses maintained, “the LORD our God comes near when we pray to him” (Deuteronomy 4:7 NCV). And he knew. The Bible tells us that “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Exodus 33:11).

So prayer is not simply a matter of words but also relationship. This does not make prayer easier but more complex. If it was simply about skill or exact verbiage or words, then prayer could be approached as a competence to be mastered. Instead, it is deep calling to deep. For this reason the disciples implored Jesus, “teach us



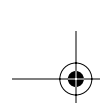


how to pray” (Luke 11:1). They had the rote formulas and pat routines; they knew of the times and patterns, postures and positions. They were interested in how they might relate to the living God the way Jesus did. So they asked Jesus to teach them how to have the relationship with God through prayer they saw Jesus enjoy.

But there was more behind this request. Religious groups and sects were often marked by how they prayed. Almost as if a denominational distinctive, how you prayed defined your religious identity. The disciples wanted to know what the defining prayer for their band would be (which is why this prayer is best termed the *disciple’s* prayer rather than the *Lord’s* prayer; for the true Lord’s prayer, see John 17). Intriguingly, Jesus did not say, “You will not be known by a prayer.” Instead, his answer suggested, “Here is the prayer that will mark *you*.” And it would define them. Authentic prayer is deeply molding and transforming, making its content decisive for the life of the Christian. The Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi* (literally, “law of praying, law of believing”) suggests that what is prayed indicates what may be believed, and conversely, what is believed should govern what may be prayed. No wonder that the early church considered the import of the Lord’s Prayer to be second only to the Lord’s Supper, and one of the most precious possessions of the Christian to steward, taught only to converts at baptism.

Yet somehow we have lost this knowledge, or lost touch with its importance. Some of us never had it, coming to faith in Christ late in life without a spiritual heritage or memory to draw from. Others have



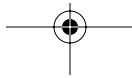
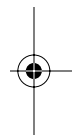


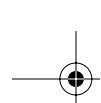
lost the deep meaning of Christ's words; even among those who recite it as a part of their weekly worship, the words have often become a matter of rote recitation or liturgical comfort. We need to return to Jesus and ask what his original followers asked: Teach us to pray.

Because we don't know how.

My church occasionally develops its weekend services by asking people to submit their top spiritual questions. The leading topics become series with titles such as "You Asked for It" and "My Big Question." No matter how many times we have offered people the opportunity to submit their leading questions, the most foundational issues related to prayer continue to make their way into the vanguard of concerns. Here is a sampling of the questions during one of the more recent polls, offered exactly as submitted:

- When a group is asked to pray for someone, why is this??? . . . 10 prayers needed for a small thing. 1000 or more for serious things such as cancer??? Signed VERY CONFUSED.
- Who has the "hot line"? . . . Is . . . God political? Does the most prayers win?
- Do you pray to God or Jesus or both?
- How should a person pray? Is there any special way to pray?
- Since God knows everything, why do we need to pray and ask for things?
- Is it okay to ask for specific needs or do I need to ask for wisdom? Will God be interested in specific wants?





So we turn to Jesus for answers and find that he does not suggest that there is a particular place to pray, much less a direction to face. There is no mention of a specific day or time. Jesus does not consider important what a person wears while praying. He does not say anything about whether we should stand or sit, kneel or lie down. He never communicates whether we should close our eyes, talk in our head or speak out loud. Apparently, none of this is important to the prayer God wants.

Here is what Jesus taught:

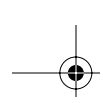
This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:9-13)*

The *Pater Noster* (Latin for “Our Father”), as it was referred to

*The traditional ending (“for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen”) did not appear in Matthew’s original text as evidenced by the earliest manuscripts, though it did appear as early as the *Didache*, a second-century manual on morals and church practice.



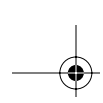


for centuries, was no formula, much less a magical incantation that was to be repeated word for word. Jesus' teaching on prayer was a road map for the journey of seeking the face of God. While praying the Lord's Prayer verbatim has a rich historic and liturgical tradition, and it has its place in the life of any believer, the words speak most directly to the *kind* of prayer that should be offered and how we should be *when* we pray. They reveal the prayer and, more important, the pray-er, God wants.

The corporate dynamic inherent within "Our Father," while rich and worthy of exploration, cannot be engaged apart from a personal, private grasp of its immediate application to us as individuals. "Again and again in public and private devotion the Lord's Prayer is taken on hurried lips, and recited at a pace which makes impossible any realization of its tremendous claims and profound demands," writes Evelyn Underhill. "Far better than this cheapening of the awful power of prayer was the practice of the old woman described by St. Teresa, who spent an hour over the first two words, absorbed in reverence and love." And there is much to absorb. Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-c. 225), offering the earliest known discussion of the prayer outside of the Bible, called it the "epitome of the whole Gospel," and Augustine called it the source of all others prayers. No wonder Thomas Merton wrote that "Saying the *Pater Noster* is like swimming in the heart of the sun."

But many of us do not know how to swim. So we begin with a





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tentative foot in the water, testing the temperature, penetrating the surface in order to cast ourselves from the shore. The first lesson seems simple enough; we just say, "Our Father."

