



The multi-faceted Word of God never ceases to amaze in its ability to give wisdom and understanding; the Lord's Prayer is no exception. It has always been an important part of the tapestry of a walk with God, yet Dr. William Edgar has opened up new and life changing dimensions of this familiar passage. Approaching this prayer as an "apologetic for the biblical worldview" puts this book in a class by itself. Without a doubt, *A Transforming Vision* will prove to be a pivotal and treasured book in the life of the church.

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Bill Edgar's *A Transforming Vision* unpacks the Lord's Prayer in order to teach you your faith and change how you pray. To pray is to honestly ask God for something. So say what you mean, and mean what you say. What you ask should be meaningful—thoughtful prayer knows who it is talking to and what it is talking about. And you should mean it when you ask—heartfelt prayer feels the weight of true necessities. Most of us drift, because we aren't seeing clearly. Our thoughtful words come out sounding dull. Our fervent words pour forth sounding confused. Or our prayers stumble on sounding both dull and confused! *A Transforming Vision* aims to fill your prayers with the riches of Scripture, so that you will know what you are asking and you will really ask.



DAVID POWLISON,

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A Transforming Vision

The Lord's Prayer
as a Lens for Life

William Edgar

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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1

Why Pray at All?



Prayer is an engine wieldable by every believer, mightier than all the embattled artillery of hell. Never out of season, nor to be deemed a drudgery, it is to be plied indefatigable, with a compass coextensive with the church universal.

(E. K. Simpson & F. F. Bruce)



Guilt

Prayer is not often thought of as carrying a major philosophy of life. Most people consider prayer to be connected with worship, and making requests to God. And so it is. Or, they consider prayer is what you do early in the morning, before meals and just before going to bed. And so it should be. Prayer in this sense is a habit, a good one. But few of us live the entire reality of prayer. Few of us are in such regular conversation with God. For many of us prayer is like the bread on each side of a sandwich. It is like getting dressed each day. Prayer is like punctuation. For the Lord Jesus and the heroes found in the Bible, as we shall see, prayer is far, far more.



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To be honest, the first reaction many of us have to the subject of prayer is guilt. Robert Murray McCheyne once said, 'You wish to humble a man? Ask him about his prayer life.' Very few of us pray as we should, whether in quantity or in quality. Yes, we make new resolutions from time to time to pray more, especially after something has prompted us: a crisis, a feeling of emptiness, a good book or sermon on prayer, observing a praying person, either from the past or in our present experience. But then the good intentions fade away and we are back into the busyness of living. Guilt! We have heard that Martin Luther prayed a good deal first thing in the morning, but when a really busy day was ahead of him, he got up even earlier to pray even more. Guilt! We may have read biographies of George Whitefield, in which we learn how he read God's Word on his knees and prayed over portions of it for hours on end. Guilt! Perhaps we are familiar with St. Teresa of Avila's nine grades of prayer: vocal, meditation, affective, simple, etc. Guilt! Or we may have paused over some of the extensive prayers recorded in Scripture. Think of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple requiring 50 verses in 1 Kings 8, which we suspect was just a brief summary. Or, those wide-ranging Psalms which qualify as prayers. And, even though he railed against the long prayers of the Pharisees, Jesus himself prayed extensively. 'And rising very early in the morning, while it was yet dark, he departed and went to a desolate place, and there he prayed' (Mark 1:35). Guilt!

Guilt is not particularly productive nor constructive. It may provide an initial prodding, but then we need to move on to something not only positive but lasting. How can we find such a way? The answer is really quite simple. Not easy, but simple. If our prayer life is less than it should be, then likely it has little to do with discipline or method. Those are helpful, but they are beside the main problem. What is the main problem? Simply, our view of God is less than it should be. The greater our God, the more significant will be our prayer life. Put differently, it's

all about our worldview, our vision. ‘Prayer presupposes faith,’ as the great French sociologist Jacques Ellul explains in his book on prayer. ‘To raise the problem of prayer, of the difficulty of praying, etc., is in reality to raise the problem of faith in the contemporary world... Prayer is a mirror in which we are called to contemplate our spiritual state.’¹

Two trends, particularly in the West, militate against a productive prayer life. The first is secularization. That word is loaded, and here is not the place to explore the concept as it deserves. Simply put, secularization means the functional absence of God in our lives. One legacy of the Enlightenment, though not the only one, is to believe we only need our unaided reason to function in life. If there is a God, he is in the gaps. Secularization means to think and live as though he were not really a significant factor, either intellectually or in practice.²

Before he became such a powerful voice into the twentieth century, Francis Schaeffer made a crucial discovery. He asked his wife, Edith, a haunting question: ‘What if we woke up one morning and found our Bibles changed? What if God himself had removed everything in it about the Holy Spirit and prayer? What real difference would it make in our lives?’ Precious little, they decided. The Schaeffers then resolved to live and act in the reality of God’s presence. Indeed, the concept of *reality* is found everywhere in the Schaeffers’ discourses and writings. Francis Schaeffer often referred to what he called the ‘two chairs.’ Christians can sit either in the ‘chair of unfaith’ or the ‘chair of faith.’ Being in the first chair does not mean you are an unbeliever, but that you do not operate in the light of the reality of the supernatural. In the chair of faith, you recognize the full reality of the supernatural world. You could be like the

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, New York: Seabury Press, 1970, Introduction. [<http://www.christinyou.net/pages/jacquesellul.html>].

² The full story of secularization is rather more complicated. See Steve Bruce, *Secularization*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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apostle Paul who had visited the ‘third heaven’ (2 Cor. 12:1–5). There he heard things that cannot be told (v. 4). Schaeffer asks us to imagine coming back down and seeing the world with new eyes. Living, then, in the chair of faith, prayer life will be greatly enhanced.³

The second trend is simply busyness. Although we only have ourselves to blame, the world demands more and more of our time for things that are means, not ends. How many of us are bound to various electronic leashes? Ask yourself, what did you do with your time prior to emails and texting? As most people do, I own a mobile phone. I even have an iPad. These devices are of course marvelously useful. But whereas I might have read a book, or talked to a real person, I now tend to send messages. I communicate rather than commune. I text rather than talk. And I notice myself being less and less patient with ordinary tasks, such as driving to the market, waiting for a letter, even walking through a museum. As Blaise Pascal told his seventeenth century readers, ‘When all is equally agitated, nothing appears to be agitated, as in a ship. When all tend to debauchery, none appears to do so. He who stops draws attention to the excess of others, like a fixed point.’⁴

In such an atmosphere prayer is necessarily diminished. You simply cannot (and should not) *text* the Lord God. Prayer takes thought, and it takes time. Praying slowly and carefully can only be cultivated when we make time for doing it. Finding the time is more than a matter of getting up earlier, or making lists and carefully going through them. That may have to happen. But something more radical is needed. We will have to change our lifestyle so that such times for meditation are not just fit-

³ See, for example, Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2002, 139–158. It is important to stress, as we will in a later chapter, that Schaeffer is not encouraging an unbiblical fascination with the supernatural, but is inviting us to take invisible forces, most of all God himself, seriously.

⁴ *Pensées*, 382.

in, but are natural. Consider the ten commandments as guides for the Christian life. None of these commandments, rightly understood, are push-button. They can be accomplished externally, but that is not the point. Not committing murder, adultery or theft is far more than refraining from pulling the trigger, going to bed with the wrong person or embezzling funds. No, these 'rules' are guidelines for an entire way of life. They speak to our hearts. We need to be retrained in order to develop love and respect for our friends to the point where we are doing far more than avoiding maligning, cheating or ripping them off. Instead, we are enjoined to cultivate such a deep respect, such esteem and reverence for our neighbors, that we could not imagine taking advantage of them. Well, the same can be said for prayer. We don't just pray out of duty, resigning ourselves to God's command to pray. Instead, we should cultivate a love for conversing with the living God, the Lord who is ready to hear, and we should long for those times when we can speak our deepest thoughts to him. We ought to relish time for prayer, publically and privately, and feel frustrated when they are not abundant. Prayer, like matters of moral comportment, is a lifestyle issue.

And it takes an entire life to learn them. Apparently, after an astonishing concert, a fawning fan approached the great pianist Ignacy Paderewski, and told him, 'I would give my whole life to play the piano like you.' To which he answered, 'And that, dear friend, is exactly what it would take.' Most of us could not approach Paderewski's music after several lifetimes. But the point is, developing a habit, such as prayer, is a matter of a life commitment.

The first principle of prayer

Let us break down the components of prayer. First of all, it is we who pray. This may seem obvious. There is no coin to insert, no mouse to click, and no requisite spiritual posture to guarantee good praying. God does not pray in our stead. *We* pray. So,

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then what is prayer, considering the one who prays? Put one way, prayer is intercession. Human beings may intercede for one another. Lawyers intercede before the judge. Parents plead on behalf of their children. Similarly, praying to the Lord is to make intercession (1 Sam. 2:5; Isa. 59:16; Jer. 27:18). We even coin the term, ‘intercessory prayer.’ The word generally means to plead, or to liaise.

At the same time, prayer is not just any intercession. Prayer is the elevation of the soul to God. As Jean-Rodolphe Ostervald, pastor of the French church in Basel in the late seventeenth century, tells us about the nature of prayer in his marvelous book of daily devotions, ‘King David says it best in Psalm 25:1, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul”.’ Ostervald reckons we learn about three aspects of prayer from these simple words. (1) Prayer must originate in our soul or in the heart, not merely on our lips. (2) Prayer must be addressed to the Lord, the true God, the only one able to hear us. (3) David’s expression underscores the zeal, the ardor, the sincerity with which we must pray.⁵

Everything hinges on our attitude in praying. In a word, we want to pray in faith. Behind a healthy faith stands a healthy view of the world. Here is where our counter-cultural apologetics comes into play. An amusing story in the Book of Acts (12:1–19) illustrates how prayer can become perfunctory or routine. The apostle Peter had been locked up in a tight security prison for having preached the gospel. The church was earnestly praying for him. The night before his trial an angel came to the prison, woke Peter up, and guided him to the exit, as his chains miraculously fell off. The liberated Peter went to Mary’s house and knocked on the door. There a prayer meeting was going on... for him! Rhoda, the house servant, went to answer, and recognized Peter’s voice. In her joy she went back inside and proclaimed to the gathered group that he was free. They didn’t believe her. ‘You are out of your mind,’ they told

⁵ Jean-Rodolphe Ostervald, *La nourriture de l’âme*, Montbéliard: H. Barbier, 1766, 7.

her. It can't be true. He kept knocking. Finally they opened the door, and sure enough, it was Peter. What was happening here? They were saying, in effect, 'you can't be Peter, we've been praying for your release, but we know it is not likely to happen.'

The story is amusing but also convicting. How often do we pray for things, resigned that nothing much will happen? We assume nothing is going to change. Instead of believing in the living God for whom nothing is impossible, we have become functional fatalists. Perhaps, we believe, some force may govern events without much real care for our needs. The end of a war? Unrealistic. A hostile relative? He will never change. One of our French friends once told us that France would never respond to the gospel today. Astonished, we asked him how he knew that. His answer was, they have had their chance. When? At the Reformation. They started to respond but then turned their backs on the gospel, so God gave up on them.⁶ Our friend had resigned himself to a world of no real change. He had forgotten that God does not rule as a grudging head of state, weary of his people. He does not give us just one chance, and then wash his hands. As long as the end of the world has not yet come, all people everywhere may still repent (Acts 17:30).

The same sentiment is behind the (musically beautiful) hymn, by James Lowell, 'Once to Every Man and Nation.' He wrote it in 1845, to protest America's war with Mexico.

Once to every man and nation,
 comes the moment to decide,
 In the strife of truth with falsehood,
 for the good or evil side;
 Some great cause, some great decision,
 offering each the bloom or blight,
 And the choice goes by forever,
 'twixt that darkness and that light.

⁶ The historical point, whether or how much French Protestants brought on the persecution themselves, is highly disputed.



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Not very good poetry, the hymn goes on to plead for us to pursue the truth, no matter how costly. In all, these words are quite man-centered. Why only once? Why does the power to offer bloom or blight reside in humanity? The hymn is close to fatalism: once we make the wrong choice, we're locked-in.

In contrast, the biblical view informs us that we have a merciful God, always ready to hear us and shed his grace upon us.

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
Nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
Nor repay us according to our iniquities...
As a father shows compassion to his children,
So the Lord shows compassion on those who fear him
(Ps. 103:8–10, 13).



This Psalm is truly God-centered, though without minimizing human responsibility. Indeed, it is when we have a proper fear of God, and a confidence in his love, prayer begins to take on far more reality than any fatalism can explain. We need to make it clear that our prayers are effective not because of anything in the formulation, or even in the thoughts of our hearts, but because we have a merciful God, who gives us a first chance, a second chance, a third, fourth and on to the next time we cry out to him.

We might note with some interest how Paul appeals to us to pray in Ephesians 6. He uses the wonderful image of the soldier taking up the whole armor of God against rulers and spiritual forces, which has inspired many a preacher and many a storyteller: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit are the indispensable protective covering for the believer doing battle with the enemies of the



kingdom (Eph. 6:13-17). But it is significant, is it not, that prayer is not among the portions of the armor? One of the reasons is surely that prayer is so important, it is not on the list, but treated separately. More than these accoutrements, prayer is simply fundamental: 'praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication for all the saints, and also for me...' (Eph. 6:18).

Thus, prayer is intercession. It is we who pray, not God praying for us. Yet our earthly intercession only makes sense if the God to whom we pray is ready to listen, full of mercy and grace.

Three powerful intercessors

So, prayer is lifting up the soul. We pray. It is our intercession. Yet, according to the Christian worldview, we are not alone as intercessors. Indeed, what allows our prayers to be effective is not primarily our human agency, important though that may be. Rather it is the intercession of God, the Holy Trinity. Though one in essence, our God exists in three separate Persons. Their purpose, while united, is also expressed through each of the Persons in a particular way. God the Father cares about the needs of his people. God the Son opens up the way into his heavenly presence. And God the Holy Spirit applies all of the Lord's grace to every area of our lives, particularly to efficacy in prayer.

(1) God the Father. Thus we can understand something of the relation of our human, earthly intercession, with God's heavenly intercession. God the Father is the holy judge of the universe. But he is also infinitely gracious and merciful. What matters to us also matters to God. So we come confidently to him. We come as advocates, interceding on behalf of people or concerns. At the same time, our concerns become the Father's concerns. To illustrate the need to intercede with perseverance in the face of a God who cares about us, Jesus told the story of the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8). Though the judge in this story was hard-hearted, the woman kept coming to him,

insisting that he hear her case. Finally he responded, weary of her pleas. God, Jesus taught, is far more responsive than a sedentary judge. He is a Father. He cares for his people. He will come just when it is right, without undue delay, because he hears their cry, day and night. If human magistrates need to be prodded to rescue widows, God is particularly sensitive to the plight of widows, orphans and aliens, as he tells us repeatedly in his Word. When our prayers are perfunctory, that would be for one of two reasons. Perhaps we have ceased caring for our cause. Or, worse, it could be because we have ceased believing God really wants to respond.

We often have a vision of God as a fitful tyrant. Certainly he is a judge and it is proper to fear him with reverence. But the Bible describes him as a Father, one who is generous with his children. The preacher and theologian Sinclair Ferguson likes to say God saves, not reluctantly, but relentlessly. Indeed, Jesus told his disciples that if even earthly fathers who are sinners know how to give good gifts to his children, how much more will the heavenly Father give us the very best. Luke records it this way: 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:13). God rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6); he is just that kind of God. So God himself is our intercessor. But there is more to it than simply that.

(2) God the Son. Gloriously, God the Son has become our major access to God. The Son became a man, and opened the way for our entrance into God's presence. The entire Old Testament tells of the way God came down to earth in order to bring his people into his presence. Various images help explain this journey. The people were to build a temple for the Lord to dwell in, a place where he could meet with them. Going up to Jerusalem on special occasions was a joyful parade, leading to Mount Zion and then to the temple. The people sang the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134) as they marched.

The problem when they arrived is that no one could enter the most holy place inside. The high priest could, but only once a year, having performed a blood sacrifice for himself and for the people. The final fulfillment of this picture is Jesus Christ, who entered Jerusalem in triumph, on a colt, with the crowds singing from Psalm 118. Then he was put to death, rising from the dead on the first Easter Sunday.

Now Jesus is our true high priest. As the Book of Hebrews argues forcefully, Jesus not only went into the holy of holies, but gave us access to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:14; 9:11-14). Because he suffered so, he understands us. He sympathizes. He makes propitiation for us (Heb. 2:17-18). Because of his once and for all death on Calvary's cross, this propitiation applies in the present. He is our advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1-2). The Father always hears him, not only because he is his eternal Son, but because he perfectly obeyed him in his life and death on earth (Heb. 5:8-10). He did this all for us, his beloved people. In what we call the 'High Priestly Prayer,' recorded in John 17, Jesus prays to the Father and makes all of these connections. He asked for his people, reminding the Father that he perfectly accomplished all that was required of him. Now that he is about to depart the world, through death, he entrusts his people to the Father's care. And the Father is delighted to answer him. Indeed, the whole purpose of the Son's incarnation, of his death and resurrection, was to give us access to God's grace (Rom. 5:2). And this open door makes the success of our prayers assured. And there is still more to it than even this wonderful truth.

(3) God the Holy Spirit. As if this provision were not enough, the third Person of the Trinity is also here to intercede for us. If the Father is the one who welcomes us, and if Christ is our heavenly advocate, we also have an earthly one, the Spirit of God. John extensively records the last teachings of Christ to his disciples in what we know as the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). Here Jesus promised the disciples that when

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he went away he and the Father would make their home with believers (John 14:23). He does that by the Holy Spirit whom he sends in his name. The Spirit is called our Helper (in the King James, the Comforter, see John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). The Greek word is *paraclete* which can mean helper or comforter, but also has a more juridical connotation. The Spirit is an advocate, a counselor, an intercessor. The Holy Spirit is the agent of God's presence and strength in the life of the church. He seals us in Christ, so that our inheritance is sure (Eph. 1:13-14). He gives us new life, resurrection life, and sets us free to please God, which we cannot do by nature (Rom. 8:2,9-11,15).

And, most important for our purposes, he helps us to pray:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26-27).

The context for this statement is the sufferings of the present life. God gives us hope, to encourage us through our sufferings (vv. 18-25). And he gives the Holy Spirit to encourage us through our longing for the new heaven and the new earth. Paul addresses us in our weakness. We are no doubt weak in every matter pertaining to perseverance, but here he stresses our inability to pray as we should. To highlight prayer is to underscore the very heart of what it is to be a Christian. To pray is to commune with God. Other aspects of the Christian life matter, certainly, but prayer is our direct line to the Father. Prayer is also the hardest activity to practice, because talking to God is where we are most weak. The remedy? Not tips on what to say, nor on our posture, nor on the hour we should pray. Rather, the remedy is the activity of the Holy Spirit. John Murray reminds us, 'Too seldom has the intercessory activity of the Holy Spirit been taken into account. The glory of

Christ's intercession should not be allowed to place the Spirit's intercession in eclipse.⁷

What does the Holy Spirit do with our prayers? There is some mystery here. His groaning may be too deep for words but that is not to say that they are devoid of content. Nor should it be thought they are unconnected with our own human inward groaning (v. 23). These expressions certainly do not refer to special gifts such as speaking in tongues. What they are saying is that the Holy Spirit in his great power and wisdom is able to transform our inadequate prayers into prayers that the Father will hear and approve. Just as God knows the hearts of his creatures, so he knows the mind of the Holy Spirit who, in this case, takes our prayers and shapes them so that they accord with his own will. That is why, in another portion of Scripture, we are told, 'if we ask anything according to his will he hears us,' and answers (1 John 5:14-15). So, then, we intercede, but in the end, God intercedes for us.

Why pray?

God is utterly sovereign. So why pray? Are human beings in any way significant? Do their prayers matter? The answer is yes, a thousand times, yes. Prayer is indeed one of the most important proofs of the double truth, God ordains everything, our actions make a difference. Prayer depends on both the sovereignty of God and the significance of human beings. While the ultimate connection between the two is mysterious (to us!), still, both must be affirmed. Indeed, human significance is *required* by the kind of sovereign God is. Without being determinists nor fatalists, we affirm that God is fully in control of everything, including his commitment to human dignity. Both sides are often stated together in Scripture, without raising a theological or logical issue. For example, Jesus forbids empty phrases in

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 311-312.

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prayer, adding the 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (Matt. 6:7-8). Well then, you might ask, why pray? No such question is raised here. The only answer given is to pray sincerely, even secretly before the 'audience of One.' God hears and responds to our prayers when they are said authentically. The fact that he knows what we will say before we say it does not subtract at all from our need to pray. In another example, Matthew records Jesus saying (actually praying with gratitude) that God hides things from the 'wise and understanding' while revealing them to little children (Matt. 11:25). He then turns around and invites *anyone* who has a burden to come to him for rest (v. 28). If you followed either thought to its logical conclusion you would end up with a dilemma. In John chapter 6, twice Jesus makes reference to God drawing his people to himself (vv. 37, 44). And twice he refers to the role of human will, or faith (vv. 47, 53-54).

One of the most striking illustrations of our double truth is by Paul, describing the Christian life to the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

A lot is going on here. Paul is away. He is in jail, actually. So he is anxious for his converted friends to keep growing, on their own. The word translated 'work out' is the same one from which we get our technical term for measuring energy: *ergs*. Expend your strength, he is saying, in a strong statement of human responsibility. At the same time, all due credit is given to God. 'For it is God who works in you,' he states, without embarrassment. This time the word for 'work' is the Greek term for *energy* itself. God is energizing you both to will and to work for his good pleasure, he tells us. To our modern question, 'so, which is it, us or God?' Paul would

simply answer, 'yes!' Although he does not spell out the link here, he does say our work is done in fear and trembling. That is a biblical expression. It can mean being terrorized. But it also often refers to an attitude of humility, or simply of faith (Ps. 2:11; 2 Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5). Even our working should not presume that it is all because of our good merits. Further, a better translation of verse 12 might say, 'work out of your own salvation.' We are saved by grace; now live out the implications of that. God's work gives us incentive to work. Our work is an index of God's work.

The one place where this relationship does seem to raise a theological issue is in Romans 9, where Paul is discussing the deep reasons why many Jews did not respond to the gospel. After some strong statements on God's election ('I will have mercy upon whom I have mercy'), he anticipates the question: 'You will say to me, then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"' (v. 19). He then comes back with even stronger statements on God's sovereignty: 'Has the potter no right over the clay?' Even here, though, Paul is not describing a determinist God. While he is certainly lifting the veil and letting us glimpse at the ultimate control over human affairs, he nevertheless fully recognizes human responsibility. Paul is not saying, in effect, 'shut up and worship,' although he does admonish those who doubt God's fairness. Instead, he argues, not for human finitude, but for human guilt. Presupposed throughout the whole passage is human fallenness. Only in a sinful world does the grace of God to some, though not to everyone, make any sense. God could well have left every human being under judgment and been perfectly right to do so. Yet he has mercy on many. The term *mercy* is telling: underserved grace for those who should have been condemned. Even the language of the potter and the clay is significant. Clay is a biblical image for human beings in their weakness. The potter takes many sinners, fragile, earthen vessels, and moulds them into beautiful pots. But not all.

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Why not? Here is the mystery. There is nothing unfair about not saving everyone, when God did not have to save anyone. Still, we may ask, as did Paul's readers, why did not everyone believe? The passage actually deals with the question, why did the Jews not all come to Christ? The question is deeply disturbing to Paul, a Jew himself, who could wish himself cut off if it could mean the Jews responding in greater numbers (9:1-4). And he defends the power of the Word of God, which cannot fail (v.6). We can fail, but not the Word. We just do not know why God chooses many but not all. We simply do not know. But this is the way it is. And because God is so wonderfully loving, whatever the reasons for his passing some by, they cannot be divorced from his character, which is profoundly good. The wonder is that he saves at all, and not only a few, but many!

All of this is to say that God is utterly powerful, and we are utterly responsible. Here is how the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (III.1).

God is powerful beyond words. Yet (notice the crucial hinge words, *yet so*) he is not the instigator of sin, nor does he violate the creatures he has made. Rather than interfering with their decision-making, he *establishes* a world in which secondary causes are significant.

The great principle here, then, is that we pray because an all-powerful God has made us significant (establishing our liberty). He has made us with the ability to relate to him, in praise or in humility or in our requests. The wonder of who we are testifies to his generosity as the Creator. He no doubt could have made us robots. Instead, he made us after his image, able to rule, able to

speaking and understanding, able to decide between right and wrong. He wants us not only to worship him as he deserves, but to commune and converse with him. He has even called us his *friends* (John 15:15). When we pray, then, we are adoring our Creator, but we are also addressing our God in friendship. Abraham was called the friend of God, and so it is of us (James 2:23). This friendship is with a difference. No earthly person can require the kind of friendship which worships and serves them. Still, when we pray to God, among other things, we come as his friends. We now may have the same kind of communion with God that the Son has with the Father (John 17:11; 1 John 1:3). Amazing!

Prayer and faith

Does this mean that anything we ask will be granted? On the surface, it would seem so. Jesus told his disciples, ‘whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith’ (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24). Again, in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus assures his disciples, ‘whatever you ask in my name, this I will do’ (John 14:3; 15:7, 16; 16:23). But this does not seem to square with our experience. What about unanswered prayer? Some pious people will tell you God always answers your prayer, just not always in the way you had hoped. Perhaps so. But then how helpful is it to be told such a thing, if you are really trying to pray sincerely and nothing seems to happen? Some will tell you, just always add the qualifier, ‘if it be your will.’ That seems safe enough, and it’s a biblical teaching as well (1 John 5:14). Maybe it is too safe. ‘Lord, please bring peace so that your people may cease from being persecuted, *if that be your will.*’ This sounds like a request to a fatalist god, not to the God of the Bible who listens caringly to his people and who cares deeply about the persecution of his people. Besides, he has expressly told us it *is* his will that there be peace, and that he will bring it about (Col. 1:20; Phil. 4:7).

However, we don’t need to jettison this phrase altogether. ‘If it be your will’ is actually much more involved than figuring out

whether or not God agrees with my request. Stephen Smalley helps us understand the deeper meaning of this concept. “There is nothing mechanical or magical about prayer. For it to be effective, the will of the intercessor needs to be in line with the will of God; and such a conformity of wills is brought about only as the believer lives in Christ.”⁸ Thus, prayer is not a push-button matter. It begins with the understanding that our whole way of life is involved. Smalley adds, “The fundamental characteristic of all truly Christian intercession is that the will of the person who offers the prayer should coincide with God’s will. Prayer is not a battle, but a response; its power consists of lifting our wills to God, not in trying to bring his will down to us.”⁹

So, what happens when peace does not come? Let us go deeper into the issue of requests and answers. First, it is clear, God being sovereign, that he reserves the right to answer as he pleases. And he may not answer our prayer as formulated. Or, perhaps, his answer might be in a very different direction from what we have prayed for. Why would this be? Several reasons suggest themselves. For one thing, some prayers are simply not legitimate, and God, mercifully, will not answer them. Jonah asked God to take his life away; but he did not (Jon. 4:3). Jonah had a mission to accomplish and even he, the missionary, could not abort it, though he tried. Two disciples requested to be able to sit next to Jesus in his glory. They not only received a very different answer (“[this] is not mine to grant”) but a promise that they must suffer a great deal before entering into heaven (Mark 10:35–44). For another, some prayers are more legitimate, yet in his wisdom God does not answer them in the way they are expressed. We may think of David, who prayed fervently that the son he had with Bathsheba would

⁸ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John: Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 51, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984, 205.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

live. But he did not (2 Sam. 12:13–23). Was his prayer wrong? Certainly not, but God chose not to agree with the prayer. We are not altogether sure why. Perhaps David needed to feel the full force of the consequences for his adultery. But we are not told this, and it is not wise to guess at it.

In some cases we do know why some particular prayers, even legitimate ones, are not answered as formulated. Paul prayed that the thorn in his flesh be removed. He prayed fervently, but in this case the Lord wanted him to rely entirely on the sufficiency of his grace (2 Cor. 12:7–10). There is nothing wrong with praying for relief or healing. We are encouraged to do so. James tells us in the strongest terms to pray for those who are suffering. ‘And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up,’ he adds (James 5:13–15). He reminds his readers of Elijah, a man of flesh and bones, just like us, whose prayer could make the rain come and go (vv. 17–18). But neither was Paul’s prayer for relief from his thorn in the flesh answered, nor are a number of our legitimate prayers answered as we could have wished. In Paul’s case there was a better way. He needed to learn afresh how God’s grace is sufficient, and how his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). When this principle is communicated with great sensitivity, it is comforting for those of us who may be suffering, and plead with God for relief. Relief is good. Full knowledge of God’s grace is better.

Prayer, together with the possible absence of the kind of answer we wish for, leads us far deeper into God’s purposes than if we simply required him to show up and perform. Consider the case for lasting peace. While God promises to bring peace, he also tells us to ask for it, recognizing that peace is never automatic. In almost every opening greeting, Paul (and the other apostles) wish for peace, the peace of God, upon the congregations (Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2). Throughout the New Testament, peace is enjoined as a goal to strive for, not a *fait accompli* (Col. 3:15;

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1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:22; Heb. 12:14, etc.). There are even warnings against a false sense of peace and security (Jer. 6:14; Ez. 13:10; Luke 21:34; 1 Thess. 5:3). So, we can see there is a complex set of realities, no one of which controls the others in any push-button sense. Yes, we should pray for peace. And yes, God will bring it. But he will do so on his own terms, making sure that first things are first.

There are still other reasons why the Lord may not answer our prayers precisely in the terms of our requests. A crucial reason is timing. Why is timing so crucial? Many reasons suggest themselves. Sometimes to answer a prayer immediately could spoil everything. The intricacy of God's Providence means he is working all things for good. Yet this means a worldview in which everything, that is, everything, concerts together for God's good purposes. This requires just the right sets of circumstances so that the good is produced, not only for the one praying, but for the Christian community and even the entire world. Vaclav Havel, who, after a long period of detention by the communists, was released and became president of Czechoslovakia (then of the Czech Republic), was criticized for not moving fast enough to undo the damage of communism and establish a complete democracy. He chided his critics, saying that if you rush things you may become like the child, trying desperately to make his flower grow by pulling it from the stem, only to find it breaks. Timing is everything!

The way God answers prayer, whether positively or negatively, always involves the deeper issue of how we relate to him. When Jacob fought with the angel all night, he received a wounded hip from it. Then he was renamed Israel ('Wrestler with God'). What an image! He had seen God face to face and lived, yet it cost him his health (Gen. 32:22–32). Likewise, when we pray we are wrestling with the living God, not clicking a mouse or paying a vending machine. So, when we pray, all kinds of things are happening. We pray expectantly, as we must. But God responds in ways far more beneficial, far more gracious than

we could imagine. He ‘wrestles us down,’ so that we become far more dependent, and far more sanctified than we might have were we in full control.

The Orthodox priest Anthony Bloom makes the sobering reflection that when prayer goes unanswered, it appears God himself is absent. Any kind of mechanical remedy that tries to force God on us is doomed to failure, because both God and we are alive: ‘The fact that God can make Himself present or can leave us with a sense of His absence is part of this live and real relationship. If we could mechanically draw Him into an encounter, force Him to meet us, simply because we have chosen this moment to meet Him, there would be no relationship and no encounter.’¹⁰ He goes on to describe some of the possible reasons for the seeming absence of God: guilt feelings, our own coldness, indifference toward God, except when we think we really need him, etc.

God rules the world as omnipotent, but also as a divine Person, who is anxious to have our friendship! Our faith, then, grows, when he wrestles with us. Faith is not a once-for-all gift. It begins decisively, but then it continues to grow and grow. Faith is ours, but it ultimately comes by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8). Faith must deepen. Such deepening often occurs through trials. James makes the connection: ‘Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness’ (James 1:2). Peter puts it this way: ‘In this [power of grace] you rejoice, though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Do we know God so well that we can feel him wrestling against us? Or is he merely a concept, a series of doctrines

¹⁰ Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray*, New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1970, 26.

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about attributes, Persons and essence? Depending on the answer, prayer is everything to us, or it is nothing!

Prayer

Gracious and holy Father,
please give me:
Intellect to understand you;
Reason to discern you;
Diligence to seek you;
Wisdom to find you;
A spirit to know you;
A heart to meditate upon you;
Ears to hear you;
Eyes to see you;
A tongue to proclaim you;
A way of life pleasing to you;
Patience to wait for you; and
Perseverance to look for you.

(A prayer of Benedict, 480–547 AD)