Spring 2022

The Baffling Blessing of Petitionary Prayer

James M. Ennis
Merrimack College, ennisj@merrimack.edu

THE BAFFLING BLESSING OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

A Master's Thesis Presented to the Faculty of

the Department of Religion and Theological Studies

Merrimack College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Spirituality

by

James M. Ennis

January 07, 2022

Under the Direction of

Joseph T. Kelley

Abstract

Petitionary prayer can be characterized as many things. On one end of the spectrum, it holds out tremendous hope full of promise and potential, but on the other end, it can also be puzzling and problematic. Bewildered by lingering questions and doubts, at times we experience prayers of petition as precarious and paradoxical, and at other times, powerful and prevailing. Petitionary prayer requires persistence, patience, and persuasiveness. Depending on how some of Jesus' parables are interpreted, it can even be reduced to pestering an indifferent God until he reluctantly responds and acts on our behalf.

There is a fairly common expression, however, that I take particular issue with throughout this paper. It is the casual statement that "prayer works." In fact, I suggest that characterizing prayer this way is actually a lazy, misguided caricaturization that does not adequately take into account the many theological and practical implications of what is a profoundly relational, dynamic partnership between God and his people. It is not my intention to cast dispersion on the motive, faith, or sincerity of those who make this assertion. Nor is it to prove them wrong, necessarily. I will argue, however, why I believe it will not, like many other spiritual platitudes and tired clichés, hold up as an unqualified pronouncement when scrutinized by serious thinkers on the subject. Furthermore, I will put forth what I believe to be better representations of petitionary prayer such as honesty, humility, and deference to those for whom prayer did not work.

The Baffling Blessing of Petitionary Prayer

Preface

"Prayer is always wedded to experience" (Boulding, 1979, 44).

Because I believe in the value and veracity of one's lived experience as much as I believe in adhering to sound and sensible orthodoxy, I begin with two personal stories. I have been married to my wife, Debbie, for thirty-five years. In all that time she has never really been sick. She rarely catches cold or comes down with the flu, never mind anything major, at least not in the nearly forty years I have known her. Then, out of the blue, it seemed, she fell quite ill. This happened during the time of Covid-19 so she was tested for the virus several times, and each time the results came back negative. Initially it was hard to get a doctor to take it seriously, until it became as apparent to them as it had always been to us, that something was very wrong. She was admitted to the hospital where they ran all kinds of tests, including numerous lab workups. When she was released from the hospital nine days later, she had improved some, but was still not well. The medical team was just as mystified as they were the day she was admitted a week-and-half earlier. I'm happy to say that after several weeks, Debbie's health and strength continued to slowly improve and today she is healthy and doing very well. Whatever she had resolved itself without any medical diagnosis or treatment. And dare I say, in spite of the many prayers offered on her behalf, there is no obvious reason to believe that prayer made any difference in her recovery, either.

My second story is about a time I found myself in a very serious personal crisis, not of my making. I experienced an injustice that turned my life upside-down. I prayed a lot during that time and was supported by much prayer from those who loved and cared about me. One

day, however, I received an email from a former parishioner of a church I pastored some three decades before. We had lost touch for a good part of that time, but she found me through an online search just to let me know that she had awakened in the night and felt a strong prompting to pray for me. She obviously had no idea why and didn't pry. She was just being obedient to what she thought God told her to do and prayed for me. This encouraged me greatly. God provided for all my needs and "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Ps. 16:6; all Bible passages are NRSV unless otherwise noted). I am in a good place today and unlike Debbie's health scare, I have no doubt it is because of the power of prayer.

I wonder why it is that prayer seemed to have played such a huge role in one situation while apparently so ineffective in the other? I want to say that prayer is a mystery and yet, even the word mystery doesn't seem to adequately capture it. A quote by the esteemed Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, SJ, seems to capture the incongruence of the two situations. This quote from Rahner was told to me by Randy Sachs, SJ, former theology professor currently serving at Eastern Point Retreat House. Randy said he came across the quote in an old German hymnbook while studying in Germany. That was many years ago, but he never forgot it.

"To be a believer means to endure the incomprehensibility of God your whole life long."

When my professor, Dr. Joseph Kelley (or Joe, as he likes to be called) advised that I keep before me the audience to whom I will be writing, I immediately knew the answer as I dug in to this particular labor of love. I am writing this for my eight grandchildren as well as any future grandchildren that have yet to grace our family and world. At the time of this writing, my grandchildren range in age from one to nine years old. I think prayer is too important to not teach them. I know they will have learned a great deal from their parents and grandparents, so

I'm not discounting that. Sadly, my concern is with the church. I fear that, if left to the church, what they will learn about prayer is apt to be elementary at best—meaning surface prayer characterized by cliches, pat answers, or never transcending transactional prayer—or confusing and distorted at worst, like saying if God doesn't heal you there must be sin in your life or you don't have enough faith, etc. My other concern is that prayer is given such low priority and, even neglected, by too many churches. Finally, I am sadly aware that some or all of them could feel the church has nothing to offer them and may not make church a part of their lives at all.

So it is to you, precious grandchildren, that I dedicate this work. I hope you will find some value in reading first-hand, not only what I believe about prayer, not only that I love prayer, but the process that led me to believe that while prayer can never be boiled down to one simple definition or formula, my best understanding and my own lived experience is that …

Prayer is as incomprehensible as the incomprehensibility of God.

And still, I love this God in all his incomprehensibility. I love him through Jesus, his unique and dearly beloved Son. The only reason I can respond to that love is because the Holy Spirit has been soaking my entire being with God's love since he began pouring the never-ending river of God's delights and fountain of life into my heart. (Ps. 36:8-9; Rom. 5:5) And as incomprehensible as prayer may be, I also know that none of this would be possible apart from prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit who prays in and for me … and for you (Rom. 8:26-27),

Corban Andrew and Brinley Joy
Caleb Micah and Judah Michael
Livienne Joy-Marie and Coen James
Eleanor Joy and Ruby June

Love,
Papa

Personal Thanks and Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heart-felt gratitude to a few people who, in different ways, made it possible for me to complete my thesis on petitionary prayer.

I want to thank my professor, advisor, and mentor, Joe Kelley, for patiently guiding me through this process. Before coming to Merrimack College, I only knew Augustine for some of his better known quotes, and even those were filtered through the matrix of other people's lenses. But you, Joe, have filled in the multi-dimensional context of what made Augustine the towering figure he is. You did this by exposing me to his vast wealth of writings and teaching me how to read Augustine himself, for myself, and not even through your own lens. You are a pastoral professor that exemplifies humility and generosity of spirit, who is as kind as you are brilliant.

I am grateful to the community of believers at the Lighthouse Church of the Nazarene in Wells, Maine, where my wife Debbie and I have the privilege of co-pastoring. Your support and prayers for me throughout this project have been a huge source of encouragement. I know that you are all praying people, and that is only one of the many things I love about being your pastor.

If prayer is desire, then Debbie is my best proof that God does hear our prayers and gives us the desires of our heart. We went through this Master's program together at Merrimack College, which was a true grace. Thank you, Debbie, for making it possible for me to dedicate the time needed to write this thesis; for doing far more than your share of the many day-to-day responsibilities, and especially for taking on more of the heavy lifting and preaching load in the final weeks of this project. You are the embodiment of someone whose life is prayer.

Chapter One ~ Introduction

"You do not have because you do not ask God …" (James 4:2b).

"The New Testament contains embarrassing promises that what we pray for with faith we shall receive" (Lewis, 1964, 57)

What is Prayer?

This paper is about prayer, which is at the heart of every religion. While prayer is understood and practiced in very different ways, depending upon one's particular religion, it is also central to the lives of many people who do not identify with a particular faith or religion at all. It is not an exaggeration to say that at some level, prayer may be a universal experience, or at the very least a universal longing. "The evidence may not tell us whether there is an instinct to pray inscribed in our biological nature, but there are grounds for suspecting that prayer is as universal as language and as old as any cultural artifact" (Zaleski & Zaleski, 2005, p. 15). Speaking in the context of petitionary prayer, which will receive extensive attention later in this work, Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink believes it is "a primal human reaction, one that breaks out everywhere and repeatedly in the world in spite of all rational objections" (2013, Kindle Location 1298). Throughout this paper, however, when referring to prayer of any sort I will be speaking about it according to the Christian tradition, regardless of one's particular affiliation or lack thereof. Kenneth Leech writes that "Christian prayer is a specific kind of prayer: it is prayer in Christ. And this prayer is rooted in, and arises out of, the Christian understanding of God" (1980, 7).

Having now established that I am specifically referring to Christian prayer, I wish that meant the topic has been sufficiently narrowed down so as to make it easier to get at its core

meaning, purpose, or essence. That is not the case, however, as prayer is still a topic too vast and varied, mysterious and marvelous, for it to be examined under a microscope—whether it be through a theological, ecclesiological, or any other kind of lens—for the sake of managing it. Even less so if we think prayer can be minimized by confining it to the ring of dueling doctrines! One of the most practical definitions of prayer comes from Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*, "I believe the most adequate description of prayer is simply, 'Talking to God about what we are doing together'" (1998, 243).

> In an encyclopedia article on *Prayer*, Augustinian scholar Joseph T. Kelley, writes,
>
> A classical Christian definition of prayer emerged slowly over the early centuries of church history: prayer is raising mind and heart to God, or asking good things of God. Theologians like Basil, Augustine of Hippo, John Damascene, and John Climacus all contributed to this understanding of prayer.
>
> The ordinary experience of conversation can serve as an analogy to help understand this definition of prayer. Prayer is like conversation with God. It is an act of faith in the reality of a divine listener. Whether expressed out loud or silently, prayer means trusting that God listens. Every prayer is a personal act of faith that furthers relationship with God. (2011, 1861)

Kelley packs a lot into his relatively brief article, and very clearly lays out the most pertinent points, stating that so far as prayer can be considered a human endeavor characterized by intention, reflection, and interiority, that "All prayer is a response to grace … is an act of the will … [and] in some way a response to the love of God revealed in Christ" (2011, 1861-1862, 1864).

The purview of prayer, however, does not belong exclusively to theologians and scholars, preachers and pundits, or monks and mystics, but to the body of Christ and all who devote themselves to prayer (Col. 4:2). This would most certainly include the artist, for who knows how limited our understanding and experience of prayer might be were it not for the poets and

songwriters who “tell it slant” as the great American poet, Emily Dickinson so deftly stated. This should come as no surprise, though, since it is in perfect keeping with the treasure trove of prayers presented as songs and poems in the Psalter. For example, James Montgomery (1771-1854) wrote a beautiful hymn in 1818 at the request of Edward Bickersteth to accompany his “Treatise on Prayer” (https://hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2009/05/09/quotprayer-is-the-soul039s-sincere-desirequot/).

Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, unuttered or expressed;
The motion of a hidden fire that trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh, the falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye, when none but God is near.

Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath, the Christian’s native air,
His watchword at the gates of death—he enters Heav’n with prayer.

And then there is the contemporary Pulitzer Prize poet, Mary Oliver (1935-2019), who captured the utter simplicity of prayer by merely “patching a few words together.”

Praying
It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak. (2006, 37)

Let me say at the outset the primary focus of this paper will be on prayers of petition and intercession. For the purpose of simplifying matters, I will be speaking of the two forms

interchangeably. For the sake of clarity, however, let me provide a definition of intercessory prayer from the article, "Jesus the Interceding High Priest: A fresh look at Hebrews 7:25" by Abiola Mbamalu, who writes,

> Intercession is an act of prayer whereby someone stands in the gap to pray or entreat the favor of a superior on behalf of a weak or inferior person. The person acting in this position is considered to have a status higher than that of the weak, needy fellow. According to Motyer (1993:431, 443), the Hebrew verb *pā-ḡa'* translated "to make intercession" literally means "to meet, reach, to arrive at", with the hyphil form meaning "to intercede for", that is, "to cause to reach" and hence "to cause someone's plea to reach someone's ears" (to intercede) or to "introduce someone into someone's presence" (to mediate). For Motyer (1993:443), this verb, as used in Isaiah 53:12, is best translated as "to make entreaty or to interpose". (2015, 4)

Much more could be said about intercession of course, but I made the determination that it makes more sense to conflate the two because at the heart of both prayer forms lies the commonality of *asking*. Besides, it's not like rigid compartmentalization is necessary, for we often combine different aspects of prayer, such as praise, thanksgiving, meditation, or periods of silence, all in the same prayer.

Tish Harrison Warren talks about how comforting the long-standing tradition of written prayers can be in her book, *Prayer in the Night*. Warren testifies how it was the prayers of the Church that carried her through a personal crisis when she "could not conjure up spontaneous and ardent faith" (2020, Kindle Location 100). She describes a harrowing winter night when she found herself in an emergency room in a new city where she and her husband had just moved a month earlier. The move coincided with the loss of her father, and now she was experiencing a traumatic miscarriage.

> The room filled with nurses, all commenting that this was way more blood than they usually saw … They put in a line for a blood transfusion, and told me to lie still. Then, I yelled to Jonathan, lost amidst the nurses, "Compline! I want to pray Compline." It isn't

> normal—even for me—to loudly demand liturgical prayers in a crowded room in the midst of crisis. But in that moment, I needed it, as much as I needed the IV.
>
> Relieved to have a direct command, Jonathan pulled up the Book of Common Prayer on his phone and warned the nurses, "We are both priests, and we're going to pray now." And then he launched in: "The Lord grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end." Over the metronome beat of my heart monitor, we prayed the entire nighttime prayer service. I repeated the words by heart as waves of blood flowed from me with each contraction.
>
> "Keep us as the apple of your eye."
> "Hide us under the shadow of your wing."
> "Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."
> "Defend us, Lord, from the perils and dangers of this night."
> We finished: "The almighty and merciful Lord, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us. Amen."

Warren then ponders the question,

> Why did I suddenly and desperately want to pray Compline underneath the fluorescent lights of a hospital room? Because I wanted to pray but couldn't drum up words. It isn't that "Help! Make the bleeding stop!" wasn't holy or sophisticated enough. I was in a paper-thin hospital gown soaked with blood. This was not the time for formality. I wanted healing—but I needed more than just healing. I needed this moment of crisis to find its place in something greater: the prayers of the church, yes, but more, the vast mystery of God, the surety of God's power, the reassurance of God's goodness (2020, Kindle Locations 81, 94).

Prayer is Experiential

Warren's powerful account speaks to why people in her tradition find such meaning by praying in this manner. Although it is not my tradition, I have been greatly impacted by Ignatian spirituality, which I will highlight here. The Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) is a school of prayer that has been changing lives for the past five hundred years. It changed mine when Sister Karen Doyle became my spiritual director and took me through the 19th annotation in 2012-2013, for which I will always be grateful. In *The Ignatian Adventure*, Jesuit priest Kevin O'Brien, writes,

> The purpose of the Exercises is very practical: to grow in union with God, who frees us to make good decisions about our lives and to 'helps souls.' Ignatius invites us into an intimate encounter with God, revealed in Jesus Christ, so that we can learn to think and act more like Christ. The Exercises help us grow in interior freedom from sin and disordered loves so that we can respond more generously to God's call in our life (SE 2, 21). (2011, 14)

In S*tretched for Greater Glory,* George A. Aschenbrenner, writes, "The whole retreat is a matter of prayer with the word of God" (2004, 5) and later adds,

> St. Ignatius believed that we can find God in all things, at every moment, even in the most ordinary times. To do this, we must take time to reflect on our experience, to look at the data of a day and discern their meaning. Ignatius encourages us to look back over a period of time and pay attention to what is happening in and around us. Then he invites us to look ahead, to what comes next, so that we can act in a way worthy of our vocation as Christians. A daily practice of praying the examen helps us discern how God is calling us in small and large Ways. God is found in what is real, so we pray from what is real in our lives. (2004, 75)

Praying in and with the ordinary events of our real everyday lives is a big part of prayer and will be given significant attention in this paper. In *Letters to Malcolm*, C.S. Lewis wrote to his friend, "I find the prayers to which I can most fully attend in church are always those I have most often used in my bedroom" (1964, 100). It could be easy to minimize the profound implications of this statement, but it is more than a clever quip from one of the greatest thinkers and writers of the twentieth century. It strike me as a serious observation from someone who practiced prayer both privately and corporately and may have detected a disconnect between the two. Being that as it may, Lewis also wrote a provocative essay entitled, *Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer*, which he ends by asking the clergy a rather difficult question. "I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?" (1967, Kindle Location 2766). But more context is needed here. Lewis had begun the essay by stating,

> The problem I am submitting to you arises not about prayer in general but only about that kind of prayer which consists of request or petition. I hope no one will think that he is helping to solve my problem by reminding me that there are many other and perhaps higher sorts of prayer. I agree that there are. I here confine myself to petitionary prayer not because I think it the only, or the best, or the most characteristic, form of prayer, but because it is the form which raises the problem … My problem arises from one fact and one only; the fact that Christian teaching seems at first sight to contain two different patterns of petitionary prayer which are inconsistent … I shall call them the A Pattern and the B Pattern. (1967, Kindle Locations 2708, 2617)

In the A Pattern, Lewis is referring to how Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray in The Lord's Prayer, and personally modeled in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his betrayal and arrest. More specifically, he is referring to "The clause 'Thy will be done.'" By this I suppose he means the A Pattern has the benefit of a built in buffer, so to speak, a way of padding your petition with some "reservation," as he puts it (1967 Kindle Location 2622).

"Over against the A Pattern stands the B Pattern," continues Lewis. He understands the A Pattern to require a "general" kind of faith, leaving matters to be addressed according to God's will, whatever that might be. The B Pattern, on the other hand, requires more of an arduous faith, faith of a …

> cruder sort: faith that the particular thing the petitioner asks will be given him. It is as if God demanded of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess, and which if he had possessed, would have been erroneous. (1967 Kindle Location 2649, 2766)

Lewis is making a very bold statement here. I think this is the kind of honesty God wants from us, though, at least if the Psalms are any indication. Recall when Lewis wrote to his friend saying the things he needs to talk to God about while wearing his Sunday best at church are the same kind of things he'd like to discuss with him while in his pajamas in the privacy of his bedroom. This is tempered, however, by the fact that he still seeks guidance from the church,

humbly asking, “How am I to pray this very night?” (1967 Kindle Location 2766). This, too, is bold and I am challenged by it. It is my hope that this paper will help people with similar questions to at least gain an understanding as to how to think through these sort of issues, and to know there are serious answers to serious questions. In this paper I will be presenting different viewpoints to these questions, questions that gnaw at us when it feels God isn’t listening and that he might not even care. At times I will make observations expressing agreement as well as disagreement on various perspectives and prayer practices.

While I obviously have my own preferences which I hope will become clear, I do not intend to promote one particular school of prayer at the expense of another. Rather, my goal is to stay in the wider lane of small “t” truth, choosing my arguments carefully in the more narrow lane of capitol “T” Truth. For to be sure, false doctrines and distorted images of God do exist and need to be corrected when discovered. But my sense is that a lot of our disputes in this many splendored Body of Christ often boil down to personality, temperament, or personal preference. We need to beware lest we get caught in the trap of committing to a particular camp or tribe into which one may have been born, or even haplessly drifted. That is simply not worthy of the God we pray to or the Name in which we pray, nor the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us, helping us in times of weakness. We would do well to heed the wisdom of the simple but profound saying, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t” (attributed to John Chapman as quoted in *PRAYER: A History*, Zaleski & Zaleski, 2005).

Any stubborn refusal to do so often leads to unnecessary consternation in what could otherwise be a very meaningful and fruitful prayer experience without breaking fellowship with our brothers and sisters whose understanding and approach to prayer differs from our own. On

more than one occasion while participating in a required group gathering with my colleagues, the person facilitating the meeting imposed a form of public group prayer that was not to my liking. Acknowledging upfront that she knew it would make some of us uncomfortable, she proceeded to instruct us all to individually pray aloud simultaneously. I'm not against this type of praying, and I certainly don't have any theological qualms with it. It's just not how I prefer to pray. I find it chaotic and distracting to the point where I am unable to commune with the Lord or feel part of the group experience. I know that God can hear each individual prayer perfectly, but to me it is like trying to talk to someone while others are talking over me. Thus, the meaning of, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." If that can happen even among my own peers, we need to respect the even greater chasm that can exist across vastly different traditions or cultures.

I agree with Joseph F. Schmidt when he writes in *Praying our Experiences*, "There are many ways to pray. There may, perhaps, be as many ways of prayer as there are people seeking to find and respond to God, who is first and always seeking us" (2008, 13). I love that there are myriad ways to pray, and I personally practice different forms of prayer myself. However, I happen to be a strong proponent of prayer forms that are experiential in nature. Schmidt does a wonderful job articulating what I consider to be both the strength and beauty of experiential prayer when he writes,

> Praying our experiences is opening ourselves to God in order to know ourselves as God knows us and to love ourselves as God loves us in the experiences of our life. It is the willingness to accept ourselves as God accepts us and to love ourselves and others as God loves us and them. It is the desire to act in a Christlike way in response to what we will come to know to be God's call in our experiences.
>
> Our God is always with us. We come to know God in and through our daily life experiences, because God is the source of our existence, and God's mercy is the very heart of our life … We pray our experiences when we use the content of our lived

> existence as the content of our prayer. Our memories and desires evoke the concrete happenings of our past, as well as our plans and hopes for the future. These memories, hopes, and feelings are the very focus of our prayer when we pray our experiences. (2008, 33, 34, 35)

There is so much I like about what Schmidt has to say here as well as throughout his excellent book, but he really captures the crux of the matter when he says, "We pray our experiences when we use the content of our lived existence as the content of our prayer." I began talking about my wife's illness in the Preface. I will return to that experience again throughout this paper, because of the simple fact that it was the true content of our lives at the time, and so it became the content of our prayer. That is to say it made prayer relevant, engaging, as well as frustrating and even anguished at times. Pamela Greenberg is a Jewish scholar of Hebrew and poet who wrote a beautiful translation of the Psalms. She wrote in her introduction how challenging it was for her to translate those passages where the psalmist cries out for revenge against their enemies. Greenberg writes,

> Such passages may reflect the truth of our experience, but they are still (and should be) troubling. What they reflect is the act of approaching God honestly—with our anger, our sense of moral outrage, our wish for vindication. They remind us that our theological ideals are not, in fact, our prayer. Our prayer always begins exactly where we are, with our particularities of pain and suffering, the particularity of our outrage. Only in this way does the "enemy" of the Psalms becomes understandable and useful. (2010, xxii-xxiii)

Finally, Schmidt made another brilliant observation in the above quote when he wrote, "We come to know God in and through our daily life experiences." Richard Rohr said something similar when he wrote, "*We know God by participation in God*, not by trying to please God from afar …" (https://cac.org/therese-lisieux-part-1-2017-10-03/). In the pages to follow we will see how others made their personal experiences—their own "particularities of pain and suffering and outrage"—the content of their prayers and thus, came to know the grace of life with God.

Prayer is Honest

If our prayer is to truly be experiential, it requires that it also be honest. Whether it is the A Pattern or B Pattern that C. S. Lewis wrestled with, my hope is that the reader has also dared to wrestle with such matters; to ask irreverent questions and be honest enough to think aloud the unthinkable, like whether "God demands of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess!"

Anne Lamotte is a bestselling author who writes extensively about experiential spirituality. By that I mean her writing stems primarily from her own lived experience (autobiographical), which is messy to say the least. Like C. S. Lewis, she has no formal training in theology or biblical studies, and doesn't purport to be an authority on these matters. She is a writer and teacher of writing by profession. In the literary world she is mostly known as a novelist and social activist. Seeming to lack any filters, she is outspoken, irreverent, sometimes cynical, yet always hopeful. In short, she's feisty, witty, refreshingly honest, and I love reading her!

Anne's salvation story is all grace, which she talks about in her book on prayer, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers.* Raised by atheistic parents who "worshipped at the church of The New York Times," she adds,

> Plus, we didn't pray. I was raised to believe that people who prayed were ignorant. It was voodoo, asking an invisible old man to intervene, God as Santa Claus. God was the reason for most of the large-scale suffering in history, like the Crusades and the Inquisition. (2012, Kindle Location 160)

She believes, however, that prayer made a difference in her life, writing

> I know beyond a shadow of a doubt, with no proof, that my grandfather (who had been a Christian missionary) prayed for all of us kids. And as it turns out, if one person is

> praying for you, buckle up. Things can happen … The other day, my older brother, John, told me this story:
>
> One night when he was seven and I was five, Mom and Dad went out and left us with our regular babysitter, a girl named Carol. When she went into the kitchen to heat up dinner, John recalled, I pulled him away from the TV. I told him urgently that I had to tell him a secret, but we had to be at the top of the stairs to the attic, and we couldn't be seen by Carol. So as we huddled together at the top of the steps, I swore him to secrecy, and then said I wanted to take the baby Jesus into my heart … That is the first time I remember praying.
>
> I have been praying on and off ever since, with a couple of bitter years as a teenage atheist when I discovered Bertrand Russell. I could always imagine God was near, or at least true. (2012, Kindle Locations 165, 170)

I took the time to provide this little bit of background about her because I thought it could be helpful putting the following quote in context, which is intended to provide further support for the importance of honesty in prayer, much the way C. S. Lewis was honest when he confessed, "God demands of us a faith which the Son of God in Gethsemane did not possess"! And also, I don't think I shall soon forget his hauntingly honest question, "I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?" (1967, Kindle Locations 2649, 2766). Maybe this is because it is the kind of question I can imagine any or all of my grandchildren asking, or at least silently wondering about someday. "I come to you, … Papa … for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?" While I hope this paper provides answers to that question in a number of ways, I think Lamotte provides an apt response. It is one that I would be proud to offer my grandchildren,

> My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said. If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride

> in you, for the courage it takes to get real—really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table. (2012, Kindle Location 87)

Psalm 51:6 says, "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." These are honest, courageous prayers!

In *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, theologian Walter Bruegemmann wrote,

> In both ancient practice and contemporary practice, prayer is a daring act. It is an act that intends to connect present *urgent context* with *sovereign compassionate holiness*. This is not an easy exercise, but one that requires great faith and courage, even *chutzpah*. The contact made between context and holiness, wherein one's life is at stake, is the quintessence of prayer, but that does not make contact easy. (2008, xx)

Bruegemmann's point about prayer as a daring act is true not only on the continuum of time between the ancient and contemporary. I believe it applies just as well to the context of place and setting, whether it be in a great cathedral, cloistered monastery, at home, the workplace, or in the car. For all the people who identify with Tish Harrison Warren's "*urgent context*" from a hospital bed, there are just as many who identify with prayer that rises from contexts that are quite common and mundane, even. Indeed God—or *sovereign compassionate holiness*, as Bruegemmann calls him—can truly be found in all places and in all of life's circumstances, whether an emergency room, bedroom, kitchen, workplace, or beach. "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth" (Ps. 57:5).

But at the end of the day, every petitioner knocking at the door of God has to decide how hard they will knock and how long they will stand there feeling foolish waiting for a response. In his Commentary on *Luke*, writing about Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8), Fred Craddock writes,

> All we know in the life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking, and waiting, trust sometimes fainting, sometimes growing angry. Persons of such a prayer life can only

> wonder at those who speak of prayer with the smiling facility of someone drawing answers from a hat. In a large gathering of persons concerned about certain unfair and oppressive conditions in our society, an elderly black minister read this parable and gave a one-sentence interpretation: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is." (1990, 209-210)

The authors I consult and cite in this paper will be people who can articulate a particular position on prayer that could be deemed helpful in one way or another—whether it comes from one of the so called "masters," someone considered to be an authority on prayer, or an obscure, unknown person or resource, even from another faith tradition—so long as it is found to be true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, or anything else that is worthy of praise. (Phil 4:8-9) If anyone could be considered a spiritual "master" or authority on prayer, it was the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Still, in *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton wrote,

> One cannot begin to face the real difficulties of the life of prayer and meditation unless one is perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience himself as one who knows little or nothing, and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments. Those who think they "know" from the beginning will never, in fact, come to know anything … We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life! (1971, 37)

Perhaps recognizing this humble truth is what makes one a true spiritual "master." As uncomfortable as it may be to admit we're all beginners at prayer, and always will be, it can free us to ask the hard questions about the nature and effectiveness of prayer. What concerns me most, however, is not that someone might ask the wrong question or step outside the line while searching for answers (and who is to say with certainty that a particular answer is right or wrong!). My biggest concern by far is for the person who has no daring questions of their own, the petitioner who doesn't wrestle with questions and is unable to even bring themselves to admit they have given God a pass on all those unanswered prayers. For this requires courage!

Does Prayer Work?

Before preaching a sermon on the problem of unanswered prayer, I invited the congregation to submit questions they had from their own lived experiences with the topic. Here is a sample of some of the questions I received and as will become evident, they are personal. They go right to the heart of the matter:

- Why did Jesus say, "Whatsoever you ask in my name shall be done," if he knew that Christians would pray for healings that would not occur?
- If God's will is going to happen then why do we have to pray? It doesn't seem like it's going to matter.
- I doubt God can understand my spastic, desperate, pathetic uttering I call prayer.
- How do I discern God's voice from my imagination, which I hear clearly during prayer?
- Despite years of trying to justify silence to my consistent prayers, I'm still unable to resolve this nagging question: We are told that God is our heavenly Father. I assume that he is the model father figure for humans as well. If this were true, why then does he ignore prayers, sometimes for a very long time (years) or seemingly respond with silence? If an earthly father treats his children this way—ignores them or is silent toward their prompting—does he not expect his children to lose heart and walk away? How then can we call him our heavenly father if we abandon our own earthly fathers in response to what can be best described as an unloving, cold, virtually non-existent father?

These are the kind of questions I kept in mind as I did my research for this paper. I will say a little more about that in chapter two when I talk about some key resources in my research. In this chapter I briefly covered some of the wide range of prayer practices and traditions under the auspices of Christian prayer. I then stated that my primary focus will be prayers of petition and intercession. But at the heart of what I want to challenge is the premise that "prayer works." And if it "works," how exactly does it "work"? How does one know when it is "working" or not? Is prayer something that is even supposed to "work?" Carey Nieuwhof is a popular blogger who is read by a lot of pastors. He mostly writes about trends affecting church and culture. I was surprised when I spotted the title of one of his blogs: "WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD STOP

SAYING ‘PRAYER WORKS’ (AND 2 OTHER THINGS)” (2021). The following is an excerpt from his relatively brief post:

> Should we really stop saying that prayer works?
> Well, yes and no.
> Most people who say prayer works these days really mean *God did what I wanted him to do*. As if prayer was a button to be pushed to release exactly what they wanted from the vending machine.
> Prayer is *not* a button to be pushed; it’s a relationship to be pursued.
> Prayer does “work,” but it works very differently than we’d like. It still “works”:
> When we can’t trace out any direct result from our prayer.
> When the opposite of what we prayed for happens.
> In those moments when we feel very distant from God.
> When we bang down the door of heaven for years and are not sure anything is going on up there at all (https://careynieuwhof.com/christians-stop-saying-prayer-works/).

To state the obvious, this is not just a blog. It is a thesis on a topic that requires serious consideration. In an article on *The Prayer Life of C.S. Lewis*, James M. Houston, Senior Fellow at the C.S. Lewis Institute, wrote,

> Wisely … Lewis argues that it is a wrong kind of question to ask, “Does prayer work?” It misleads us about the true nature of prayer. The quiet composure of heart before God rests in a relationship that is deeper, far deeper than words can ever express. This is where Lewis so clearly rested, and explains why so little need be said really about prayer. It is to be experienced rather than superficially talked about. (2006) (https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/The_Prayer_Life_of_CS_Lewis_FullArticle)

To be clear, I believe the Christian who boasts, “prayer works,” is expressing their faith and gratitude in a good and faithful God. Their intent is to sincerely give God the praise and glory for a perceived answer to their petition, even when that answer may be “no,” or what some just refer to as “unanswered prayer,” as reflected in the questions above. Though I’m not sure how many praying Christians have thought through the deeper implications of the phrase, I want to affirm the fact that such a person was faithful enough to heed the call and that they even cared enough to pray at all. Much of the time they were most likely praying for someone in dire need

and rejoiced with them when it seemed God answered their prayers and wept with them when he did not, at least in the way they had hoped.

While I have no doubt that God is very pleased with this kind of faithfulness, those two words, "prayer works," are nonetheless loaded with unintended and potentially problematic implications. Because those two words are usually stated in the context of petitionary prayer, my intent is to explore these issues, questions, and implications in the more narrow scope of petitionary prayer within the larger sphere of Christian prayer in general. The truth is, however, we don't have to know how prayer works in order to pray. People interact with things everyday that they do not fully understand, so it is important to approach this topic with humility. Historian and New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright says,

> Prayer remains mysterious at one level. Nobody quite knows "how it works," and this not knowing seems to be part of the point. But it remains a deeply practical thing to do. One of the great Christian leaders of the 20th century, Archbishop William Temple, declared that whatever else one might say about whether prayer worked, he had noticed that when he prayed, "coincidences" happened; and when he stopped praying, the "coincidences" stopped happening. That reminds me of the great golfer who, when someone accused him of being lucky, agreed, but commented that he'd noticed that the more he practiced the luckier he got. (2002, 78)

In chapter two I will provide an overview of my research by highlighting a few of the primary books and authors I consulted for this thesis. Likewise, I will also highlight a few of the principal scholarly journal articles that contributed to my study of petitionary prayer. In chapter three I will do a deep dive into the inner workings of Christian prayer, particularly prayers of petition and intercession, asking how it may or may not "work." My approach will be biblically grounded, trinitarian in theology, and relational and experiential in praxis. In chapter four I will explore some of the deeper implications at stake and highlight a few of the issues and questions

that remain outstanding. In chapter five I will synthesize and add to the major arguments made up to that point.

Finally, while we will consider some key prayers in the Hebrew Scriptures, we will also spend time learning from Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. We will not only learn from his teachings about prayer, both in his parables and "the Lord's Prayer," but also—to the extent that any of us can know—by the way Jesus himself prayed. We are told in scripture, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Hebrews 5:7).

Chapter Two ~ The Research

The resources used in this paper are quite varied. Most of the time I am in full agreement with them and sometimes I merely want to present an alternative point of view. Either way, I am deeply grateful for a plethora of resources coming from a diverse field of eminent scholars, theologians, pastors, and practitioners. As evidenced throughout the paper, a wide range of authors were consulted. While some were already familiar to me, others were new. The following are just a few of those who represent the many voices we will hear and whose brilliant work will provide help and support in our journey to better understand the grace of prayer.

Whether they come from academia, vocational ministry, or were trained in a discipline other than religion or theology, they are all serious thinkers in their own right; people like C.S. Lewis, Dallas Willard, Henri Nouwen, Walter Brueggemann, Joachim Jeremias, and Mark Gregory Karris. These represent the book authors I will cover briefly in the first half of this chapter. In the second half I will showcase scholarly journal articles by the the likes of Michael Cameron, J. David Moser, Rowan Williams, Eleonore Stump, Joshua Hoffman, Shieva Kleinschmidt, Nicholas D. Smith and Andrew C. Yip. Together they make a tremendous contribution that is sure to challenge and enlighten us on the topic of petitionary prayer.

Primary Books and Authors

C.S. Lewis was a twentieth century British intellectual and distinguished Professor of English literature at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. He was a prolific author, unique in the sense that he could write bestsellers in several different genres such as science fiction, children's literature, fantasy, and allegory. Lewis also wrote extensively on Christian apologetics, spirituality, and prayer. The latter themes are what always interested me most. In

my thesis I cite some of my favorite C.S. Lewis writing on prayer, primarily from *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue Between Man and God*.

Having known him personally, James M. Houston, a retired academic and current author on Christian spirituality, said that in his own personal encounters with Lewis, he never heard him speak about prayer. He wrote, "Lewis was never forthcoming about his own prayer life. A shy man, he was all the more sensitive to the Oxford atmosphere then prevailing, that you no more discussed religion too intimately than you talked about your kidneys."

According to Houston, as a lay theologian and lay preacher, Lewis took a lot of guff from his colleagues about crossing into a different academic discipline without the proper qualifications and had been publicly challenged for preaching. But this was during the Battle of Britain and Lewis simply chalked it up to trying to do his part to fill in wherever necessary, as many others were doing. Houston said that Lewis wrote somewhat of an apology or defense in "the preface to his published BBC talks given during the war: 'There is no mystery about my position. I am a very ordinary layman, of the Church of England, not especially 'high' nor especially 'low,' nor especially anything else.'" (https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/The_Prayer_Life_of_CS_Lewis_FullArticle). C.S. Lewis may not have talked much about prayer publicly, but he certainly did go public through his writing.

> … By talking at this length about prayer at all, we seem to give it a much bigger place in our lives then, I am afraid, it has. For while we talk about it, all the rest of our experience, which in reality crowds our prayer into the margin or sometimes off the page all together, is not mentioned. Hence, in the talk, an error of proportion which amounts to, though it was not intended for, a lie.
>
> Well, let's now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer, but not

> while we are reading a novel or solving a cross-word puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us. (1964, 113)

Dallas Willard was a Baptist minister turned philosopher. Willard taught Philosophy at the University of Southern California in Los Angelos from 1965 until the time of his death in 2013. Even though it was a different time and place, like Lewis, he could be derided by his colleagues in academia when he began to achieve some notoriety for his writings on Christian spirituality. Being an ordained minister did not shield him from scrutiny. Although he had published much in the area of philosophy, it was most of his wonderful books on prayer and spiritual formation that I have read. I even had the privilege of sitting under his teaching for two full weeks when I was working on a Professional Certificate in Spiritual Formation. In this paper I rely heavily on his excellent work in *The Divine Conspiracy* (I have read the 419 page book three times!). Chapter Seven, "The Community of Prayer" alone has left an indelible mark on my understanding of prayer. I believe the following insight says more about why people have so much difficulty with prayer and get so easily distracted, as C. S. Lewis opined above.

> Prayer simply *dies* from efforts to pray about "good things" that honestly do not matter to us. The way to get to meaningful prayer for those good things is to start by praying for what we are truly interested in. The circle of our interests will inevitably grow in the largeness of God's love.
>
> What prayer as asking presupposes is simply a personal—that is, an experientially interactive—relationship between us and God, just as with a request of a child to parent or friend to friend. It assumes that our natural concerns will be naturally expressed, and that God will hear our prayers for ourselves as well as for others. Once again, this is clear from the biblical practice of prayer. (1998, 242)

Henri J. M. Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest, theologian, and pastoral psychologist who has also been a major influence in my spiritual formation. As a professor he taught at Ivy League Universities such as Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. He was a prolific writer on prayer,

pastoral psychology, and Christian spirituality. There is a storehouse of spiritual wealth in his more than forty published books. Having read more than half of them over three decades, I have internalized a great deal of his thinking on prayer and spirituality.

Nouwen is one of those rare authors whose books are just as popular with Protestants as they are with Catholics. I love that he is so honest, authentic, and vulnerable in all of his writing. Nouwen was always restlessly searching for a place he could call home, but never found it in the world of academia. After receiving more than one invitation from Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, he finally found a place of belonging in the most unlikeliest of places. Henri spent the last ten years of his life and ministry at L'Arche in Toronto, Canada, living with, and caring for, people with severe physical and intellectual challenges. It was a place that could not have been more different from the heady atmosphere he had spent most of his career. The residents at L'Arche were unable to read and totally unaware of Henri's status and popularity as a best-selling author. He attributes all of this to God hearing his prayer and deepest desire of his heart. Nouwen speaks of this time in his life in his published journal, *The Road to DayBreak*.

> Gradually I discovered that Harvard was not the place where I was called to follow Jesus in a more radical way; I was not really happy there, found myself somewhat sulky and complaining, and never felt fully accepted by the faculty or students. The signs were clear that I still had not found the way. In the midst of all my doubts and uncertainties, the voices of Jan Risse, Jean Vanier, and L'Arche gained in strength. When I visited the L'Arche community in France I experienced a sense of at-homeness I had not experienced at Yale, in Latin America, or at Harvard. The noncompetitive life with mentally handicapped people, their gifts of welcoming me regardless of name or prestige, and the persistent invitation to "waste some time" with them opened in me a place that until then had remained unavailable to me, a place where I could hear the gentle invitation of Jesus to dwell with him. My sense of being called to L'Arche was based more on what I had to receive than on what I had to give. Jean Vanier said, "Maybe we can offer you a home here." That, more than anything else, was what my heart desired, even though I had never taken my desire seriously, and that gave me the first inkling that

> my prayer to follow Jesus more radically was being heard … (2013, Kindle Locations 109, 2102)

Walter Brueggemann is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a renown theologian who has authored more than one hundred books and a multitude of scholarly articles. In this paper I utilize two of his books, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, and *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*. The latter is my primary resource and I quote him extensively, especially from his study on the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18. I wish I could have said more about his profound, though unconventional ("theologically ignoble") insights regarding the prayerful encounters of other characters in the Hebrew Scriptures. I had to be selective to keep within the confines of the paper, but here is just a small sample of how he exegetes a dramatic account in Numbers 14.

According to Brueggemann, "Moses, the dominant figure in Old Testament faith, is characteristically and everywhere 'the man in the middle'" (2008, 11). Brueggemann is referring to an episode (in Exodus 2-3) where Moses defended a Hebrew slave by killing the Egyptian taskmaster that was brutalizing the Hebrew. The next day he came between two Hebrews fighting and broke it up. The one who was in the wrong shot back at him, saying, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Pharaoh then heard about it and threatened to kill Moses, so Moses fled and tried to lay low and mind his own business, which he did for the next forty years until one day he noticed a burning bush that would not be consumed. Once again Moses found himself in the middle. This time it was in the middle of an epic battle between the Lord and Pharaoh.

Fast forward a bit and we find Moses in the middle once again. This time it is between God and the Hebrews he used Moses to deliver out of Egyptian slavery and lead to the Promised Land. As they were on the precipice of achieving the great feat of leaving the wilderness to enter the land God was giving them, "a land that flows with milk and honey," the people rebelled. They rose up against Moses and Aaron and threatened to stone them. They impugned God's character and vowed to elect a new leader that would take them back to Egypt.

> Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they." (Num. 14:10-12)

By now this has become somewhat of a familiar dance with the Israelites acting up, God threatening to annihilate them, and Moses pleading with God to change his mind, which he does (See Ex. 32:11-14). The most interesting part, however, is how Moses gets God to change his mind. To which of God 's many attributes does Moses appeal? This is where Brueggemann's commentary becomes particularly challenging.

> But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, 'It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.'" (Num. 14:13-16)
>
> The spectacular assumption of the entire utterance of Moses to YHWH is that YHWH is self-consciously concerned about the judgment other nations will make. That is, YHWH is vain enough to care about such "world opinion," that such a judgment made on YHWH will amount to a loss of face in the conflicted world where YHWH must compete for a valid reputation. To be sure, such an address to YHWH that warns YHWH of bad

> consequences of a decision made in impatient anger strikes us as theologically ignoble.
>
> But such is the nature of prayer in the Bible, and such is the nature of regressive, desperate prayer among us when we are pressed to appeal to God's self-interest … Moses appeals to God's self-maintenance and self-care, for Moses knows that YHWH cares not only for Israel and for the world, but for God's own self. Moses can anticipate, more than can YHWH in YHWH's indignation, the unwanted consequences of the decision YHWH is about to make in anger. (2008, 16-17)

Interestingly, rather than appealing to the usual attributes of a God who is "omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent", which we will see is routinely used in the articles referenced in this paper, Brueggemann describes a God who can only be characterized as narcissistic. Let me repeat what he said above. "Moses appeals to God's self-maintenance and self-care, for Moses knows that YHWH cares not only for Israel and for the world, but for God's own self." Having said all of that, I need to also say how heartened I am that Brueggemann also points out how part of Moses' tactic was to appeal to God's own promises, goodness, and love by repeating back to God his own words about himself (Ex. 34:6-7):

> And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,
>
> "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation. Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now." (Num. 14:17-19)

Brueggemann is well within bounds here, but much of his assessment leaves him on ambiguous theological ground, in my opinion. In all fairness, Brueggemann is lifting much of his analysis directly from the text, yet to hear the way he characterizes God as petty and self-absorbed is challenging. If I used Brueggemann's commentary in a sermon in most churches

where I have preached, I doubt I would be invited back. If I preached this to my own church, I'd probably be in hot water, especially if I used this final Brueggemann quote, "It is evident in this exchange that Moses loves Israel more passionately than does YHWH …" (2008, 21). Brueggemann seems to know he's teetering on unorthodoxy when he raises the possibility of being "theologically ignoble."

Why then do I include so much of Brueggemann's commentary in this paper? I like that he takes risks, that he is willing to color outside the box, so to speak. He's provocative, he stretches us, he makes us think. His comments, as uncomfortable as they are, are not imposed upon the text, but come right out of the text and his interpretation of the text.

Joachim Jeremias is a German Lutheran and highly esteemed New Testament Scholar. This is my first time reading Jeremias, but it will not be the last! I found his scholarship to be remarkable and am greatly indebted to him for his tremendous insights as he added great value to my thoughts on Jesus and prayer. He never dismisses the fact that "Jesus came from a people who knew how to pray" (1967, 66). And yet, his fabulous contribution to Jesus' use of "Abba" and the high place of giving thanks in Jesus' prayers is, in a word, unrivaled.

> A new way of praying is born. Jesus talks to his Father as naturally, as intimately and with the same sense of security as a child talks to his father. It is a characteristic token of this new mode of prayer that it is dominated by thanksgiving. The only personal prayer of Jesus of some length from the time before the passion is a thanksgiving in spite of failure (Matt 11:25 par. Luke 10:21). An echo of this predominance of thanksgiving is preserved in John 11:41, where Jesus gives thanks *before* being heard. There is a profound reason for this predominance of thanksgiving in Jesus' prayer.
>
> Thanksgiving is one of the foremost characteristics of the new age. So when Jesus gives thanks he is not just following customs. There is more to it than that; he is actualizing God's reign here and now. (1967, 78)

Finally, I need to say a brief word about Mark Gregory Karris. Karris is not a theologian or philosopher. Though he is an ordained minister, he works primarily as a licensed marriage and family therapist and teaches courses on counseling as an adjunct professor at Point Loma Nazarene University. He makes it clear that he has been heavily influenced by Thomas Jay Oord, an open and relational theologian. Karris even borrows from the title of one of Oord's books, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence,* in the title of his own book, *Divine Echoes: Reconciling Prayer With the Uncontrolling Love of God.*

I think Karris has done some very good work in this book, which is borne out of his own profound struggle with unanswered prayers, first for his mother, a drug addict for as long as he can remember. In spite of the many years he and others prayed for her recovery, her life ended tragically from a drug overdose. The other heart-wrenching story is about his brother who suffered a psychotic break at twenty-one years of age and was eventually diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Karris testifies,

> I tirelessly petitioned God on behalf of my brother. I cried, wailed, begged, and pleaded with him. My desire was for the all-powerful God of love and the Great Physician to heal my brother completely. I thought that if God would only snap his mighty fingers or whisper the word "healed," my brother's neuronal connections would fire properly again. Unfortunately, God never snapped his fingers or said a magic word. To this day, my brother remains tormented by one of the worst diseases of the mind an individual can have. (2018, Kindle Location 158)

Karris' brother did well so long as he took his medication. But when he stopped taking his medication, tragedy struck. He not only ended up in prison, but also killed a man while in prison, where he will now spend the rest of his life. Karris talks about how this impacted him:

> The specter of the failure of prayer haunted me. I could not shake it. Something about it just did not add up. The tiresome steadfast Christian answers echoing from dear friends and mentors did not help at all. Constantly, I would hear things like:

- "God has a plan and is in control."
- "Your brother's healing is right around the corner."
- "If you fast and pray hard enough, God will give your brother a breakthrough."

> Over time, those responses felt shallow and fell flat. The fate of my mother and brother, combined with the inadequacy of such clichés, set me on a mission to figure out the conundrum of prayer. Deep in my bones, I knew God's plan could not have included the deadly overdose that killed my mother. I also knew a slow, torturous, deathly, and dehumanizing existence inside a prison cell was not God's will or plan for my brother. I couldn't figure out how to rectify the existence of a good God with the lack of successful prayer for loved ones. (2018, Kindle Location 163)

Karris' fine book is about the investigation he undertook to find answers that would lead him into a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction of his theology of petitionary prayer. These are just a few of the books and book authors that greatly benefited me in my own quest to get at the true essence of petitionary prayer with all its many nuances.

Key Scholars and Journal Articles

Let's now turn our attention to the journal articles in my research. When it came to choosing articles, there were some that fell under categories of what I deemed to be sub-topics that supported the primary focus of this particular paper, such as Jesus as Intercessor, or studies that attempted to prove or disprove the efficacy of prayer from a more scientific approach (I had more material than I could use). The articles I chose for what I considered to be major topics were largely grouped according to three different themes: Petitionary Prayer, The Lord's Prayer (which is petitionary), and St. Augustine's Christology of the Psalms, particularly his doctrine of *Totus Christus*. In the process of reading several articles, it became apparent to me that when it came to two of the themes—Petitionary Prayer and Augustine's impressive work in the Psalms/

Totus Christus—each category revealed there was one article or author that tended to stand out among the rest and therefore, rose to the top in terms of being more of a ground-breaker.

The way I judged whether or not they served as a standard bearer in their particular field was by noticing how often other research scholars referenced their work. Other articles were written in response to theirs, either to affirm or rebut their arguments. Usually it was a little bit of both, but mostly to refute and then present their own alternative findings. But either way, these subsequent articles were of a secondary nature, written for the purpose of building upon original or primary research.

The fact that petitionary prayer is the primary theme of my thesis, and that I am utilizing Augustine's significant contribution to the Psalms/*Totus Christus* in a smaller section to support the larger theme, is reflected in the number of articles I could use, respectively. So in the area of *Totus Christus*, I only consulted three journal articles, and one encyclopedia article. It became quickly obvious that Michael Cameron, who specializes, writes, and teaches on Historical Theology, stands out as a giant in this field. I include two other authors on that topic, J. Moser and Rowan Williams, who clearly affirm Cameron's work, synthesize his scholarship, but also contribute their own perspectives.

When it came to the larger subject matter, Catholic theologian Eleonore Stump stood out as the obvious authority in the field of petitionary prayer. While we will be looking more extensively at Stump's arguments in the next chapter, suffice it so say that one of her basic arguments centers around friendship with God and how difficult it is to have a close relationship with God because of the inherent imbalance of power that exists between the Creator and the created; an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God and mere mortals. Joshua Hoffman's

article, "On Petitionary Prayer," was one of the first articles I read that cited her work. Hoffman begins by stating, "The traditional philosophical conception of the God of Christianity and Judaism is of a being who has necessary existence, and who is essentially omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent" (1985, 21). He then continues to state his main purpose:

> It is to show that what I take to be a necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer can be met on the traditional conception of God, and this despite the existence of certain plausible-seeming arguments to the contrary. The intuition behind this necessary condition is that if a prayer is efficacious, then God brings about what is prayed for *because* it is prayed for, and not just for the sake of that which is prayed for …
>
> … The first argument which purports to rule out the satisfaction of necessary condition is one which emphasizes the incompatibility of God's goodness with petitionary prayer. This argument, or one like it, has recently been discussed by Eleonore Stump. It will be evident to those who have read her important and interesting paper that my response to the argument (and to the version of it which follows) is very different from hers. This argument … goes as follows:
>
> If one prays for some state of affairs, *s,* which God subsequently brings about, then since God must create the best of all possible worlds, He would have brought about *s* even if one had not prayed for it. Hence, in those cases where one's prayers are answered, those prayers are not really efficacious. And if one prays for a state of affairs which God does not subsequently bring about, then, obviously, in this case, too, one's prayer is not efficacious. As Professor Stump has expressed the conclusion of this argument, "So either an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God has predetermined this state of affairs or he hasn't; and either way, asking for it seems to make no sense." (1985, 21-22)

By highlighting Hoffman and two other authors, I am attempting to accomplish two things. One, the influence that Stump's original research has on other researchers, and two, the fact they make their own arguments that add value to the field and how that impacts my own arguments.

In another article by Shieva Kleinschmidt, "The Experiential Problem for Petitionary Prayer," the author poses,

> Petitionary prayer, in which prayer-givers petition God for things through prayer, is very common. But there is a puzzle about how to explain why one might engage in petitionary

> prayer, because it is hard to see how prayers can make a difference to what God (understood in the sense of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent creator of the world) does: if God exists, God already has the knowledge, power and motivation to do what is best. Given these features, it looks like God will do the best that He can do. So, one might worry, either petitionary prayers are already for what it's best for God to do, in which case He would do it anyway, or they are for something it's not best for God to do, in which case the prayers will go unanswered. Petitionary prayers are thus powerless, so participating in the practice of petitionary prayer appears pointless. (2018, 219-220)

Kleinschmidt presents two different versions of what she refers to as "the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," which she then proceeds to frame as "problems." The first three points fall under what she views as the "Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer" followed by two more under what she characterizes as "The Pointlessness Problem of Petitionary Prayer."

> 1. Necessarily, if any petitionary prayer makes a difference to what God does, then either God wouldn't always do what's best regardless of our prayers, or God doesn't always do what's best in light of our prayers.
> 2. Necessarily, God always does what's best regardless of our prayers, and God always does what's best in light of our prayers.
> 3. So, necessarily, no petitionary prayer makes a difference to what God does.
>
> The idea behind the Logical Problem is that a prayer's making a difference to what God does is incompatible with God's being perfectly good, all-knowing, and all-powerful. For having those features entails that God will already do what is best (assuming we have a solution to the Problem of the Best), and they also entail that God will only act in accordance with a petition if it is a petition to do what already is best. To generate a puzzle about the rationality or value of petitionary prayer, we can add the following two lines to the above argument:
>
> 4. Necessarily, it is irrational/pointless to petition God for something through prayer unless it is possible for some petitionary prayer to make a difference to what God does.
> 5. So, necessarily, it is irrational/pointless to petition God for something through prayer.

To counter **"Logical Problem of Petitionary Prayer"**, Kleinschmidt proposes an **"Alternate Value Response"** (Bold in original), which she argues that …

> regardless of whether the conclusion is correct, the value of petitionary prayer (and perhaps the general rationality of engaging in it) is not derived from our influencing what

> God does, but is instead derived from other aspects of the prayer, such as the differences it can make in us, in our communities, and in our relationship with God.
>
> One can read Eleanor Stump (1979), Murray and Meyers (1994), and Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (2010) as having all presented versions of this response. For instance, Stump takes the value of petitionary prayer to derive primarily from the impact that participation in the institution can have on our relationship with God. Stump notes that joint projects are important in friendships, especially when there is a significantly unequal distribution of power between friends. Petitionary prayer allows us to be active participants in God's projects. (2018, 221-222)

While Hoffman bases a good portion of his article on Stump's contentions, Kleinschmidt's article responds to three different researchers and this is the only time she cites Stump. It is interesting to me, maybe even concerning, that instead of seeing value in the direct "benefit" if you will, of petitionary prayer, she settles for the ancillary benefits; namely, "the differences it can make in us, in our communities, and in our relationship with God." My own understanding of Stump is that while she does make a case for the ancillary benefits, she does not do so at the total expense of petitionary prayer. Granted, she does present a brutal examination on petitionary prayer. If I could be given some latitude for hyperbole and use medical terminology, I might compare Stump's treatment of the topic to more of a scrupulous internal exam, but at least she does not perform an autopsy (see #'s 3 and 5 above).

When Hoffman talks about the "necessary condition for the efficacy of petitionary prayer," it is important to note he bases that on what he refers to as "the traditional conception of God," or more specifically the "omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent" attributes of God. Kleinschmidt mentions the exact same attributes. And Stump also refers to the "omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God" as well. Please take note of the frequent use of the "omni's," both here and above, as I will be circling back to it shortly.

There is yet a third article where Stump is a major source of reference (I actually cite a fourth article in the next chapter by Martin Pickup, but I did not think it was necessary to include it here); “Partnership with God: a partial solution to the problem of petitionary” by Nicholas D. Smith and Andrew C. Yip. We begin with their abstract:

> Why would God make us ask for some good He might supply and why would it be right for God to withhold that good unless and until we asked for it? We explain why present defenses of petitionary prayer are insufficient but argue that a world in which God makes us ask for some goods and then supplies them in response to our petitions adds value to the world that would not be available in worlds in which God simply supplied such goods without our asking. This added value, we argue, is what we call “partnership with God.” (2010, 395)

I will spare the reader from further repetition of Stump’s friendship analogy and simply note the authors’ comment that “Stump’s own solution to the problem relies on God's love for us, despite the very unequal relationship we have with God, who is infinitely greater and more perfect” (2010, 399). Instead, I would like to feature what the authors have to say about partnership because this influenced my own thinking quite a bit.

> By “partnership” we mean the commitment to share in the good works of God, as far as our ability to do so allows. Partnership, we contend, is central to the value of petitionary prayer. A pledge of partnership entails the petitioner's genuine desire in obeying, loving, and sharing the ways of God in his or her earthly life. By obeying God the petitioner acts in concord with God, which increases and grows the good will of the petitioner in future actions. By loving God and one's fellow human beings, the petitioner gains motivation in willing and doing good to others. By sharing the way of God with others the petitioner expands these goods to his earthly neighbors so as to increase good thoughts and deeds on earth. Therefore, a theistic conception of petitionary prayer should include an earnest commitment to partnership in God's good works.
>
> Even in cases in which the petitioner cannot conceive of a way he or she could be engaged in the good aim of the petition, and even if there can be, as a matter of fact, no such participation from the petitioner, we contend that a vow of partnership should be central to the sincere act of petitioning. For without an implicit pledge of partnership a prayer is actually a request for God to serve us in some way, rather than to give His assistance. (2010, 404-405)

I think this argument makes a good case for those who might think petitionary prayer is "pointless," and how to make sure it is not. Having said that, I do not think it is up to us to give it a point, even though I believe partnership with God is essential. It is also interesting to me that all three articles reference Stump's example of friendship with God. Even though it does not appear in the section I included from Hoffman, out of the three, he probably gives it the most space. I too comment on this part of Stump's article, even though there were other arguments and examples packed into her rather dense article.

After reading Stump's article multiple times, I came to see for myself why she spurred others on to respond and offer their own arguments on petitionary prayer. It is noteworthy to me that Stump's article was published in 1979, yet these other three were published in 1985, 2010, and then as recently as 2018. That researchers would still be referencing Stump over the span of three decades is quite impressive. That does not include the possibility of other articles that may have been written since 2018 or those that may still be written and published in the future, citing Stump's original paper while making new arguments of their own. I will not take the space to present her thoughts here since I incorporate a good part of her work into the body of this paper.

I asked the reader to take note of the frequent use of the "omni's"—"omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent"—attributes of God that Hoffman, Kleinschmidt, and Stump (who used "perfectly good God" instead of "omnibenevolent") take as a given when forming their theology of petitionary prayer. I could not help but notice the difference between their conventional understanding and Walter Brueggemann, whose theology seems to be less conventional.

> This dialogic transaction that marks Israel's prayers is thick and complex; but most of all, it is *real* according to Israel's best faith. This transaction is not to be understood in terms of classic theological claims of God's "omniscience" and "omnipresence," for it is exactly that God does not know and God is not present that evokes much of Israel's prayer … The attempt to situate prayer in the context of conventional Western theology has caused prayer to be anemic and polite, and without urgent expectation, because there is a quality of unreality about prayer with a God who is "omni." From such a theological assumption, the impact of prayer is frequently taken to be upon the one who prays, because the God addressed is already, by definition, out beyond our prayers. (2008, 133)

I admit that I do not always know what to make of Brueggemann, but I include him because he contributes a relevant and fresh perspective that I believe deserves a hearing. In fact, while it often goes against the more conservative theology in which I was schooled, I cannot help but feel it rings true. It certainly explains a lot of the standard questions and dilemmas that conventional theology raises, leaving some to conclude that petitionary prayer is simply powerless, pointless, puzzling, and problematic. Brueggemann's perspective does not erase all of those dilemmas, but it does seem to weaken the strength of their case. It is also true that Brueggemann's own case may just raise different questions and dilemmas.

Either way, none of this troubles me. All of these contributors merely highlight the fact that there are no easy answers and that without honest inquiry and risk-taking within the bounds of a generous orthodoxy, pat answers and tired cliches are more likely to go unchallenged. I do not consider such an outcome to be a viable or acceptable option in our pursuit of truth on this most worthy endeavor. Let us now continue our our quest to better understand, as best we can, the limitations and potential of petitionary prayer.

Chapter Three ~ Petitionary Prayer: Promises and Problems

"I answer everyone who invokes me" (Psalm 91:15a, TJB).

"Every war, every famine or plague, almost every death-bed,

is the monument to a petition that was not granted" (Lewis, 1964, p. 58)

The Precarious Nature of Petitionary Prayer

Strictly speaking, the prayer of petition, or "impetration," as it is technically known (Stump, 1979, 81), is when one asks God for something on behalf of themselves. Intercessory prayer is when we ask on behalf of another. (Foster, 1992) For the sake of consistency, however, I will conflate the two throughout this paper, for at the heart of both petitionary and intercessory prayer is the matter of *ASKING*. It is taking Jesus up on his audacious promise, "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24). So whether it is for yourself or for the sake of another, the common theme of *asking* is what is central to both. As Dallas Willard makes clear in *The Divine Conspiracy*, it is "indeed the great law of the spiritual world through which things are accomplished in cooperation with God and yet in harmony with the freedom and worth of every individual" (1998, 232).

Petitionary prayer, however, is a risky proposition, for both God and the petitioner. The vulnerable petitioner is obviously in a precarious position totally dependent on the mercy of Almighty God hoping, sometimes against all hope, that their request will be granted. The Almighty God risks having his ways and character impugned, sometimes to the point where the relationship with us that he literally gave his life for is placed in jeopardy. Fr. William Barry likes to tell the story of when he asked his dying mother what God was like. "He's a lot better than he's made out to be," she replied (1987, 16). In response to one of Jesus' challenging

teachings we are told, "… Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'" (Jn. 6:66-67). I am also reminded of Jesus' response to his cousin John the Baptist, who was imprisoned by Herod for proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. At one point he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he really was the One they had been waiting for? Jesus' answer, in part, was simply, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:1-6).

"Petitionary prayer is a difficult and almost ominous topic …", wrote Susanne DeCrane in her excellent essay, "Ask for Anything: A Retrieval of a Theology of Petitionary Prayer," DeCrane continued to explain what she meant by that:

> As we pray in a petitionary manner, we stand in an implicit acknowledgment that we depend on something outside of ourselves for what we seek and need. To expose one's need always reveals one's vulnerability, one's dependency. In the face of the Christian affirmation of a good, loving, engaged, and provident God, the experience of praying and not having the outcome be what one hoped for and prayed for is disconcerting at best, and at times devastating. (1996, 113)

In another article by Martin Pickup—also written in response to Eleonore Stump—gets right to the point:

> Petitionary prayer has a problem: it seems as though it is useless. Suppose I ask God for something in prayer. If that thing would overall be bad, a benevolent God would not grant my petition. If the thing would overall be good, a benevolent God would provide it whether I asked for it or not. In either case, the prayer itself is pointless. This argument gives us philosophical reasons to doubt whether petitionary prayer could ever work. (2018, 84)

After his rather provocative introduction to the topic, Pickup steps back a little to break his point down with a reasonable qualifier explaining what is meant by his claim that prayers of petition are useless and pointlessness, a familiar refrain.

> … what we mean by effective petitionary prayer is successful petitionary prayer: prayer which is effective for a particular outcome. We ask God for something, and our asking has an effect on the thing we ask for. Our question, then, is the following: what is it for a petitionary prayer to be effective for a particular outcome? Or, in other words, what is it for a petitionary prayer to be successful?
>
> The answer is that petitionary prayer needs to a make a difference to the outcome. This, I take it, will be universally accepted. (2018, 85)

Petitionary Prayer on Trial

I did not find Pickup's article all that useful. He was able to state the problem clearly enough, but his analysis of the problem was overcomplicated and simply not helpful. Nonetheless, it is true that petitionary prayer has a problem. Indeed, petitionary prayer itself is on trial. At least this is how Karl Rahner, one of the most respected and influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century puts it. In one of the first of his voluminous books, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, Rahner creates an imaginary trial:

> The plaintiff in this case is the entire course of human events. All the bitter and desponded hearts have appointed themselves as the judges. And the united nations of all the unhappy people are witnesses for the prosecution …
>
> … in the end we are all poor and unhappy and are all gathered in the witness box against the prayer of petition. And all these people come from everywhere. They come from all countries, from all times, all ages and classes. And what they have to say against the prayer of petition is one and the same charge of despair, disappointment, of angry or weary unbelief. And this charge is (oh, one could go endlessly):
>
> We prayed, and God did not answer. We cried, and he remained mute. We wept tears that consumed our hearts. We were not allowed before his countenance. We could have proven to him that our claims are modest, that they are realizable, since he is the Almighty. We could have demonstrated to him that fulfillment of these petitions is in the vital interest of his glory in the world and of his kingdom.
>
> Those are the charges against the prayer of petition. And naturally God himself is the accused. (1997, 48-50)

It is important to put the stark scenario painted by Rahner in context. The setting was Munich, Germany and it was the first Lenten season since the horrors of WWII had finally come to an end. Most of the city was in rubble, "and only a few gutted out buildings, mostly churches, remained standing … In early 1946 the CARE packages had not yet started to arrive; the Marshall Plan did not exist; there was little food, potable water, or public utilities" (1997, xx). Fr. Rahner was standing in the remains of St. Michael's Church, one of those gutted out churches, and he preached eight sermons on Christian prayer that make up the eight chapters of this book. "When challenged by an interviewer because of his great faith despite the horrors of Nazism, Rahner said, 'I believe because I pray'" (1997, ix).

Petitionary Prayer and Friendship With God

What are we to make of the kind of discrepancies between our heart-felt petitions and, at times, heart-breaking outcomes? In our most honest moments we admit that we have often wondered whether there is either something wrong with God or with us. In her seminal article, "Petitionary Prayer," Catholic theologian Eleonore Stump raised several problematic scenarios regarding prayers of petition, and one of them was how difficult it is to have a close relationship with God because of the inherent imbalance of power that exists between the Creator and the created; between the petitioner and the One being petitioned. She notes how both in the Old and New Testaments, the kind of loving relationship God seeks with human beings is deeply personal and intimate, depicted in familial images such as marriage (Eph. 5:25-32), parenting (Isa. 49:15; Hos. 11:1-4), as well as friendship (Ex. 33:7, 11; Jn. 15:13-15). And therein lies the problem. In the case of friendship with God, Stump writes,

> But if the relationship between God and human beings is to be one which at least sometimes can be accurately represented as the love of true friendship, then there is a problem for both parties to the relationship, because plainly it will not be easy for there to be friendship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, infinite, imperfect person. (1979, 86-87)

And yet, there are others like the influential Jesuit priest and prolific author, William Barry (who I just referred to above) who consistently wrote on two related themes—prayer, and friendship with God. Though he was a learned man who also held a PhD. in Clinical Psychology, his many books, though not elementary, were intentionally simple, as was his understanding and practice of prayer. He believed and taught that prayer was simply being conscious of God, which he thought of as another way of saying "the raising of one's heart and mind to God" (1987, 13). In one of his books, *A Friendship Like No Other*, Barry said, "I maintain that God—out of abundance of divine relational life, not any need for us—desires humans into existence for the sake of friendship" (2008, xiv). That is a glorious thought! And in *Praying the Truth*, Barry wrote, "I believe that God wants a personal relationship, an adult friendship, with each of us and that prayer is the best way of engaging in that friendship. By prayer I mean what occurs when I am conscious in some way of God's presence" (2012, 1-2).

The idea of friendship with God is hard for some Christians to accept. My wife and I have been leading soul care retreats for many years. Speaking at one church, we chose this topic as the theme for our retreat and were not prepared for the level of resistance with which our message was met. No one spoke to us harshly or inappropriately in any way, but a number of people expressed how they were genuinely struggling to accept the concept of God as friend. Basically, they did not believe it was honoring to God's holiness to view him as a mere friend. Becoming "too familiar" with God felt strange and irreverent. This was in spite of the biblical

passages (some are cited above) we felt clearly supported it and used as the basis for our teaching. I think this is important, however, because a healthy view of friendship with God goes a long way in helping to navigate a life of prayer that is honest, true, hopeful, and joyful.

Stump raises her own concerns regarding friendship with God that are different than those raised at the retreat that day. When she talks about the improbability of such a friendship, she likens it to a child from an aristocratic family becoming friends with a child from the slums. The socio-economic imbalance of the two children's families is rife with problems, explaining,

> The greater the discrepancy in status and condition between the two friends, the greater the danger of even inadvertently overwhelming and oppressing or overwhelming and spoiling the lesser member of the pair; and if he is overwhelmed in either of these ways, the result will be a replacement of whatever kind of friendship there might have been with one or another sort of using. Either the superior member of the pair will use the lesser as his Lackey, or the lesser will use the superior as his personal power source. (1979, 86-87)

Petitionary Prayer: Buffer or Bridge?

Oddly enough, in my mind at least, Stump presents prayer as the very solution to the problem she describes; something I would never have thought of. She poses that,

> Prayer acts as a kind of buffer between man and God. By safeguarding the weaker member of the relation from dangers of overwhelming domination and overwhelming spoiling, it helps to promote and preserve a close relationship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, infinite, imperfect person. (1979, 90)

Stump admits the idea of petitionary prayer serving as a buffer between God who is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good, and humans who are fallible, infinite, imperfect people, is "counter-intuitive," particularly in light of the fact that prayer ought to bring us closer to God. She argues, however, that healthy closeness also requires some healthy distance, thus, creating a "buffer." I believe she is correct that a healthy relationship requires both closeness and distance. It seems as

though she is trying to communicate a common problem in relationships that so many of us are familiar with today, known as codependency. The scope of this paper does not permit me to elaborate on the complexity of codependent relationships here. Suffice to say, however, I think she is talking about preventing the individuality, or the self, of the weaker member in a relationship from getting dominated and swallowed up by the larger self of the more dominant person in the relationship.

While I think Stump's point has merit, I also think she is missing an essential characteristic of God, for he had already considered those relational dynamics of appropriate closeness and distance and, in my mind, did everything in his power to overcome that distance, or chasm even, between God and humankind. For while God is most certainly omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, he is also lowly and humble.

> For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isa. 57:15)

In the kind of human relationships Stump is describing, she seems to be saying that a heathy distance is needed to correct an unhealthy sense of closeness. But the problem is the exact opposite in the relationship between God and humans. A heathy sense of closeness is what is needed to bridge the inherent distance that came as a result of sin. Before their disobedience, Adam and Eve enjoyed close fellowship with God. But that closeness was compromised by the intrusion of sin.

> They (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:8-9)

The Incarnation: How God Came Close

Whenever we read about an encounter with an angel and a human being in Scripture, we see just that kind of overwhelming awe and fear the celestial being strikes in the human. This is why God did not come to us as an angelic-like being that would frighten us. Instead, he came as a human; a helpless, vulnerable, disarming infant. In *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey retells a compelling parable written by the 19th century Danish theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, that further describes the extent to which God went to prevent overwhelming us with his love and desire to get close to us:

> Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden, begins a story by Kierkegaard. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden.
>
> How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with Jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him?
>
> She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How could he know?
>
> If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf between them.
>
> "For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal," concluded Kierkegaard. Now

paraphrasing Kierkegaard, Yancey writes,

> The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to *descend*. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her cottage incognito, with a worn cloak fluttering loosely about him. It was no mere disguise, but a new identity he took on. He renounced the throne to win her hand. (1988, 103-104)

Returning to Stump's original example of the child from an aristocratic family becoming friends with a child from the slums, I think she is right. The only way to bridge the chasm that exists between the child from the nobler heritage in order to be truly friends with the one of humble means (today we might say the under-resourced), would be to voluntarily renounce his privileged status in the world. That is precisely what Jesus did,

> Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

I will conclude this line of thought, for I believe it emphasizes the point that prayer need not be a buffer between God and humankind, in order to allow for a safer closeness in the relationship. Jesus himself modeled this when he prayed, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Matt. 11:25-26). And if that was not clear enough, once he prayed this jubilant prayer of thanksgiving to the Father, he said immediately thereafter, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). William Barry captures the wonders of the Incarnation and this Father-Son intimacy when he writes,

> Recently it struck me that perhaps the deepest reason why God was so pleased with Jesus was that Jesus let God come as close as any human being could. In other words, to the maximum possible for any human being Jesus let God be intimate with him, let God love him as much as God wanted to and could. (1987, 79)

How Human Relationships Help Us to Understand Prayer

This closeness was reflected in Jesus' prayers. Prayer, in my opinion, even petitionary prayer, though rife with complications, was never intended to serve as a buffer between us and God, but rather a bridge. This is a blessing, baffling as it may be. Dallas Willard astutely observes how the role of asking one another for things is common to all human relationships. It is because *asking* is so basic and primary to relationship that Willard says, "God does not just give us what we need without being asked. Prayer is nothing but a proper way for persons to interact" (1998, 234). Willard notes that when Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened," he was not stating this in the context of prayer, for he had not gotten that far yet. He begins, rather, with human relationships. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?" It is only after Jesus makes it clear that he is referring to the normal way that human beings interact, that he makes the connection with prayer. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:7-11). (Willard, 1998)

Jesus begins with the relationship between a human father and child, and then builds upon that to include the relationship between our heavenly Father and his children. And of course, Jesus goes beyond the familial relationship by extending the personal nature of making requests of one another in other human relationships, first in a parable involving the asking of a favor between friends and neighbors, and then in a more adversarial relationship between an

unjust judge and a persistent widow in search of justice. (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8) "The picture of prayer that emerges from the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is quite clear," writes Willard. "Basically it is one of asking, requesting things from God" (1998, 241-242).

If I Were God …

I wish that Willard was wrong in coming to this conclusion, but I know he isn't. The truth is, I am thankful to God for answering so many of my prayers since I was a child. I have also been amazed to witness the remarkable ways he has worked in the lives of my four kids and their families, as well as many others I know. That God answers prayer is not in dispute with me. What I find baffling, however, is what I perceive to be a lack of consistency, for unlike other forms of prayer, petitionary prayer has left me feeling frustrated and disappointed more times than not. I admit that more than once I've thought to myself, "If I were God I would have prevented the Holocaust, or 9/11, or natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis from happening. I would not let little children get cancer and die or allow women to get raped. I would not have let more than five million people around the world die from COVID. I would not … etc., etc."

This is why I stated at the very beginning of this chapter that petitionary prayer is a risky proposition. When prayer goes unanswered, the temptation is to think there is either something wrong with God—maybe he is really not such a good God after all—or maybe there is something wrong with me. If only I had more faith or was more righteous, my prayers would be more effective. After all, James 5:16b says, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." No wonder Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer. Just before telling the parable about the widow and the unjust judge, we read, "Then Jesus told them a parable about

their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Lk. 18:1). But sometimes we do lose heart and ask ourselves, "Why pray at all?"

There is a quote attributed to C. S. Lewis that speaks to how I often feel. As far as I can tell from my research, it does not seem to appear in any of his actual writings, but can be traced to *Shadowlands*, a movie about his life. There is a scene whereby C. S. Lewis (played by Anthony Hopkins) responds to a friend by saying, "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me" (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108101/characters/nm0000164).

The synoptic Gospels tell of the time a desperate father brought his son who was tortured by a demonic spirit to Jesus's disciples for help, but they were unable to ease his suffering. When Jesus arrived on the scene the father explained the problem and said, "… but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:22b-24). Jesus healed the boy and gave him back to his father, fully restored and whole. Afterward Jesus' "disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer'" (Mk. 9:28b-29).

The father's honest answer to Jesus' question pretty much sums up my own relationship with petitionary prayer—"I believe; help my unbelief!" And Jesus' response to the disciple's question—"This kind can come out only through prayer"—makes me wonder if we can also take this to mean that there are some things that do not necessarily require prayer for good things to happen. Sometimes Christians may be too quick to credit the efficacy of petitionary (and as a

reminder, intercessory) prayer when that might not be the reason for things turning out as they did. Sometimes people recover from illness because their bodies responded well to treatment; they get the job they applied for because they were the most qualified candidate; they buy or sell their house at just the right time because the market was working in their favor, or any number of ways that things may happen to work out. Am I minimizing the power of prayer? Not at all! Am I justifying a lack of faith? I do not believe so. Should we still thank God for these blessings? Absolutely! It is precisely because I believe and value prayer as much as I do, that I think we as Christians should be more discerning so as to know when prayer really is the difference-maker in any given outcome. We should not be so quick to claim, "prayer works" unless we can say so with a bit more certainty that it did so because of the role that prayer played. At least we should not limit prayer to the times when there are positive outcomes. I believe a more strident faith is needed to proclaim "prayer works," regardless of the outcome, if we need to use it at all. The very idea of prayer being something that "works" or "doesn't work" strikes me as something that is mechanical or transactional, but certainly not relational.

Prayer and The Active Shooter Test

David Gushee is an influential Christian theologian-ethicist who has studied and written a great deal about the horrors of the Holocaust and Holocaust theology throughout his career. In his book, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity*, he refers to an essay written by Jewish scholar and rabbi, Irving Greenberg, that tells one of the more gruesome accounts of the Holocaust from the testimony of a survivor. At a time when the crematoriums did not work, adults and children were gassed to death and then incinerated in the open fields. But when the

gas chambers no longer worked, the SS guards resorted to burning their victims alive. As Gushee relays the story in Rabbi Greenberg's essay,

> *Children were sometimes burned alive at Auschwitz*. People's beloved children and grandchildren were taken by their hands and feet and thrown into pits of fire, where their precious little faces and hands and bodies were incinerated as they briefly howled out their unbearable pain. It happened. Elie Wiesel testifies to the same thing in his haunting memoir, *Night* ...
>
> After describing this scene, Rabbi Greenberg put forward the following proposition: "*No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children*."
>
> Greenberg's staggering proposition became known as the burning-children test. Probably few readers will have heard of it. But it has never left me.
>
> Test all statements (about God, theology, morality, faith, life) based on whether such statements would be credible in the kind of world in which two-year-olds have been thrown alive into pits of fire. I would hasten to add: the kind of world in which *Jewish* two-year-olds have been burned alive mainly by baptized *Christians*. (2020, Kindle Location 1569)

I appreciate Gushee's perspective and self-imposed litmus test when making statements "about God, theology, morality, faith, life." In order for a theology of prayer to be credible, should it be held to a similar standard, I wonder? Before being so quick to say "prayer works," when determining the efficacy of prayer, should it be required to meet the active shooter test? Because if prayer does not "work" in those situations, then maybe it does not "work" at all.

What if we had the Sandy Hook test as a way of keeping our theology of prayer in check? On December 14, 2012, an active shooter murdered 26 people at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. Twenty of the victims were six and seven year old children. Several of the victims' families were Christians active in their churches. Two weeks after the massacre and three days after Christmas, Christian author Philip Yancey was invited to speak at a church the

next town over from Newtown and where a number of the families attended. After giving a talk, Yancey engaged in a question-and-answer time. In *The Question That Never Goes Away*, Yancey writes,

> One more, final question came from the audience on my last night in Newtown, and it was the one I most did not want to hear: "Will God protect my child?" I stayed silent for what seemed like minutes. More than anything I wanted to answer with authority, "Yes! Of course God will protect you. Let me read you some promises from the Bible." I knew, though, that behind me on the same platform twenty-six candles were flickering in memory of victims, proof that we have no immunity from the effects of a broken planet. My mind raced back to Japan, where I heard from parents who had lost their children to a tsunami in a middle school, and forward to that very morning when I heard from parents who had lost theirs to a shooter in an elementary school. At last I said, "No, I'm sorry, I can't promise that." None of us is exempt. We all die, some old, some tragically young. God provides support and solidarity, yes, but not protection—at least not the kind of protection we desperately long for. On this cursed planet, even God suffered the loss of a Son. (2013, Kindle Location 1135)

Can Prayer Change God's Mind?

Recalling the quote from *Shadowlands*, "I pray because I can't help myself … It doesn't change God. It changes me" (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108101/characters/nm0000164), I must ask if it is true that prayer doesn't change God? Theologians have long debated the issue, so it is not likely to get fully resolved here. Nonetheless, the question begs our attention, for if God's mind cannot be changed, petitioners are right to ask, "then what is the point of praying?" Mark Gregory Karris makes a couple of good distinctions on this point.

> Prayers for others' discretionary needs are viable. We are in a relationship with a God who loves us and those for whom we pray. God having an ultimate loving aim in mind does not mean God is inflexible and unable to be moved. God is a moveable mover. Being in a relationship means there is a push and pull, a dialogical dance of mutual influence. Therefore, we can change God. We cannot change God's nature, but we can change his direction. We can change God's mind because we are in a relationship with him, just as God can change ours … It is only in relation to his promises that he does not change his mind. In other words, God does not break his promises. (2018, Kindle Location 1734)

I agree with Karris when he says, "Being in a relationship means there is a push and pull, a dialogical dance of mutual influence." How healthy could a relationship be if both parties, in a marriage say, were not able to influence the other regarding the barrage of decisions that have to be discussed and decided upon every day? When it comes to issues like finances, parenting, division of labor, or where to go on vacation, couples negotiate in order to influence and be influenced so as to arrive at the best possible outcome for the good of the family. Karris reminds us that we are not talking about God changing his fundamental nature, or God breaking his promises, for that would not be possible. We are only talking about changing his mind, and that is only because he is open to being influenced.

By saying we are *only* talking about changing God's mind, I do not mean to be flippant about this or to suggest that God changing his mind about anything as a result of human prayer is a small matter. Hardly! Furthermore, like all analogies, I am keenly aware that comparing one human being having the ability to influence another human being to change their mind has serious limitations when talking about humans having that same ability with the Divine. Finite human beings change their minds multiple times every single day, ranging from the mundane such as what they might want for dinner to more serious decisions like whether or not they want to be an organ donor. God is not fickle, but perfect. Ample consideration has already been given to God's divine attributes in the previous chapter, namely, that he is "omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent." With that in mind, it does not appear that scripture provides a clear and definitive understanding one way or another. For instance, the New Testament refers to God as "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17b).

On the other hand, the Hebrew Scriptures present times when God can be influenced to change his mind as a result of human pleas.

In Ex. 32:7-15 when God was about to unleash his wrath on the Israelites, we read, "But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? … And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (vv. 11, 14). Jer. 18:5-10 is another convincing example:

> Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it."

A More Generous Theism

"What, then, could ever induce God to change his mind and alter the course of events in the world for the sake of a petitioner's request?", asks Gianluca Di Muzio, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University Northwest. In his excellent article, "Changing God's Mind," Di Muzio argues,

> To start answering this question one needs to consider the idea that God wishes to relinquish some of the control he has over the world for the sake of involving his creatures in the realization of the world's destiny. This divine attitude, which we may term "controlled involvement," seems connected with the act of creation …

> The key component of this outlook is the idea that God is willing to accede to some human petitions because he is committed to involving human beings in bringing the world to its state of completion … God charts an optimal course towards the goals he set for those he loves, but he is also disposed to listen to their requests for the sake of the good constituted by their involvement in the plan's realization. (2019, 251-252)

Di Muzio acknowledges this view requires "a higher, more comprehensive outlook on petitionary prayer," but firmly believes it is a world view consistent with theism. I might add that it is also consistent with understanding prayer as "an act of faith in the reality of a divine listener" (Kelley, 2011, 1861) noted in the opening pages of this paper. If we believe these statements to be true, then we have to be open to a more generous understanding regarding the nature of petitionary prayer and why it matters at all. Di Muzio says it well when he states,

> Thus, petitionary prayer does not fall on deaf ears even when listening to it requires God to change his mind and alter his original intentions. For a commitment to involving others in the realization of a common plan requires taking their needs and aspirations into consideration. Inflexibility is not compatible with a commitment to cooperation. Such a commitment expresses itself, among other things, in the form of a willingness to change one's mind - when appropriate - for the sake of the other party to the relationship. (2019, 253)

Di Muzio bases this "deeper understanding" on three basic theistic commitments:

> (A) God has a plan for the world.
>
> (B) The plan will certainly be realized, but it is not subject to the kind of divine determination that would thwart or override human decisions and contributions. Instead, the plan's realization crucially involves human beings, their free choices, and their cooperation with their Creator. God wants to lead the world to its completion with His human creatures, not independently of them.
>
> (C) While the realization of God's plan is certain, multiple different paths may lead to it, because the free choices of human beings can open new lines of development at all times. (2019, 251-252)

If we are to take the Bible seriously, which is one of three foundational premises for making a case for petitionary prayer, what are we to make of the fact that while scripture reveals a God who will on occasion change his mind, there are other scriptures that would state otherwise? One instance appears in 1 Sam. 15:29, "Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind." And then again in Ps. 110:4, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" What are we to make of the apparent contradiction? This is the subject of an excellent article, "DOES GOD 'CHANGE HIS MIND'"? by Robert B. Chisholm Jr., Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. "Under what conditions does God retract a statement or deviate from a course of action? Under what conditions does He refuse to do so?" asks Chisholm, whose short answer is, "It all depends" (1995, 387). Fortunately, he also provides a longer answer:

> In the Old Testament not all statements of intention are the same. Some are decrees or oaths that are unconditional and bind the speaker to a stated course of action. Others, which may be labeled announcements, retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action.
>
> One can discern this distinction between a decree and an announcement at the divine (theological) level. A divine decree (or oath) is an unconditional declaration. Because it is certain to come to pass, the response of the recipient cannot alter it, though, as will be seen, the exact timing of its fulfillment can be conditional. An announcement is a conditional statement of divine intention which may or may not be realized, depending on the response of the recipient or someone else whose interests it affects. (1995, 389)

These are important distinctions, and Chisholm acknowledges the two are not always that straightforward, thereby holding there are two kinds of decrees and two kinds of announcements. He refers to these four types of "forward-looking divine statements in the Old Testament [as]: (a) marked or formal decrees, (b) unmarked or informal decrees (c) marked or explicitly conditional

statements of intention (d) unmarked or implicitly conditional statements of intention" (1995, 387-388). Chisholm includes various biblical examples to make his case. Among his many examples he includes ones already mentioned above, with Ex. 32:7-15 and Jer. 18:5-10 falling into the category of announcements, and placing 1 Sam. 15:29 and Ps. 110:4 in the divine decrees column. The following examples, however, probably make his case more emphatically.

> Divine decrees are usually clearly marked as such. Something in the statement itself or in the immediate context indicates its unconditional status. For example in Gen. 22:16-18 God swore by His own being that He would bless Abraham. Later references to this promise call it an "oath" and regard it as an unconditional gift (Gen. 26:3; Ps. 105:9-10). In Gen. 15:18-21 God guaranteed Abram and his descendants future possession of the land of Canaan. This declaration is formalized by an accompanying ritual (vv. 9-17) … God's promise to David is also called an oath and is characterized as eternal and unalterable (Ps. 89:3-4, 33-37).
>
> Conditional statements of divine intention are often clearly marked as well. For example in Jer. 26:4-6 the Lord announced, "*If* you will not listen to Me . . . then I will make this house like Shiloh, and this city I will make a curse to all nations of the earth." Sometimes an announcement completes an indirect volitive sequence, implying that it will be fulfilled if the accompanying command is observed. (1995, 389-390)

Needless to say, Chisholm's scholarly article is quite involved, incorporating a lot semantics. It helps if the reader has a background in the original Hebrew, which I do not. Nonetheless, I tried to extract Chisholm's primary thesis that may broaden our perspective regarding this deeply complex theological issue. It certainly expands on Karris's statement at the beginning of this section when saying, "It is only in relation to his promises that he does not change his mind. In other words, God does not break his promises" (2018, Kindle Location 1734). While I appreciate the contribution that Mark Gregory Karris brings to this topic, he is not always able to provide the rigorous scholarship necessary to substantiate his perspective. This is not intended to minimize the work of those who are not academicians. From the outset I

said it would take voices from all different sectors to develop a thesis that applies and belongs to all praying Christians, but may also have questions that can impede those desires. I will conclude this section with Chisholm's final summary statement on the matter:

> Does God change His mind? It all depends. If He has decreed a certain course of action or outcome, then He will not retract a statement or relent from a declared course of action. Verses stating or illustrating this truth must not be overextended, however. Statements about God not changing His mind serve to mark specific declarations as decrees. They should not be used as proof texts of God's immutability, nor should they be applied generally to every divine forward-looking statement. If God has not decreed a course of action, then He may very well retract an announcement of blessing or judgment. In these cases the human response to His announcement determines what He will do. Passages declaring that God typically changes His mind as an expression of His love and mercy demonstrate that statements describing God as relenting should not be dismissed as anthropomorphic. At the same time such passages should not be overextended. God can and often does decree a course of action. (1995, p. 399)

Praying Our Experiences

Earlier in this paper I talked about the time my wife became very ill. Of course, Debbie and I, along with many others, prayed faithfully and fervently, asking God to heal her. While in the hospital, we asked God to give the doctors wisdom and help them to identify and treat whatever was causing her illness. I did not just ask—I pleaded with him. After a while, though, I did not know how to pray anymore. I began praying a different prayer, a prayer that I did end up praying day after day. I would ride my bike down to the ocean, just a mile from where I lived, sit on the sea wall and after a long silence would say the only thing I knew to be true. "God, I know that I love you. And I know that you love me. I know that you love Debbie and that you have her best interest at heart. Amen." That was the only prayer that felt right to me, so I stuck with it. All this time God remained silent—DAY AFTER DAY.

One day while walking along the beach, I recalled a psalm I read that morning. "How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them" (Psalm 139:17). I told God that I really needed him to share one of his precious thoughts with me. The tide was low and as I looked at the wide expanse of beach I prayed, "God, your thoughts are as vast as the number of grains on this huge sandy beach. Surely you can share just one of them with me. After all, I have certainly let you know what's been on my mind! That is all I'm asking for, just one of your vast array of thoughts." I was not mincing words with the Lord. I wanted him to respond! I continued to walk and listen, but heard nothing. I reminded the Lord a few times of what Ps. 139:17 said and told him that if it was true then I needed him to tell me something—anything he was thinking in regard to Debbie and her current health crisis. It never occurred to me that he was not mindful of her situation or that he had no thoughts about her plight, our plight, which is why I prayed as boldly as I did. My understanding of prayer is that it is a two-way conversation.

Back in chapter one I said I would return to this one sentence that was part of a larger quote by Aschenbrenner. "God is found in what is real, so we pray from what is real in our lives" (2011, 75). Well, this is what was real in our lives. I walked for nearly an hour and as I turned to leave, I noticed something written in the sand. I turned back to read it. It was in very large letters, almost like someone might write "SOS" on a stranded island. The message took up a long span of space on the beach:

"PRAY FOR ERICA PLEASE (image of cross)
GOD PLEASE HEAL ERICA
IN JESUS NAME
AMEN"

I turned once again to walk back to my car when it occurred to me that I should probably pay more attention to what I just read. In one of his blog posts, Ronald Rolheiser said,

> Jesus challenged us to "read the signs of the times." The challenge here is not so much to have an intellectual insight into a particular event as it is to see the finger of God in that event. John of the Cross says: "The language of God is the experience that God writes into our lives." To read the signs of the times is to look at each event of our lives and ask: "What is God saying through this event?" (https://ronrolheiser.com/reading-the-signs-of-the-times-2/#.YXmBIS-B0ic)

I was not thinking of that quote at the time, but it does describe what I was experiencing. I walked back to read and ponder the message again. "Lord," I prayed, "I have spent the better part of an hour asking you to share at least one of your thoughts with me, and then I unexpectedly come upon this. What is it that you would like me to know about this? I am listening, Lord. Does this represent one of your thoughts? Are you revealing something of your heart to me?"

Previously I mentioned Ignatian spirituality and how one of the dynamics of the Spiritual Excersises is the discernment of spirits which according to Aschenbrenner, "is the sensitive, faith-filled sorting out of sensitive moods, impulses, and urges in order to see which ones are from God and which are not" (2004, 20). Sometimes people get discouraged because they feel that nothing happens when they pray. While I have often felt that way myself I have come to fundamentally disagree with that characterization of prayer. I understand all too well that we may *feel* like nothing is happening, but I strongly believe that something always happens when we pray. Even when I stopped praying for God to heal Debbie or to help the doctors figure out what was wrong, I never stopped praying. When I began reminding God (and myself) that I knew I loved him and that he loved me … it was actually a statement of faith and trust that I

knew God heard me. I knew that no matter what the outcome, it would not happen because I finally wore him down so that he would give in and do it just so I would stop pestering him.

Does God Really Need to Be Pestered Before Acting?

I realize this flies in the face of Jesus' explicit teachings about this very issue, where Jesus seemed to equate persistence with pestering (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8). That last parable about the widow and the unjust judge ends with a piercing question from Jesus: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b). In spite of the fact that I have not been able to find a reliable source who will back me up on this, I simply refuse to believe that that is how "prayer works." I cannot accept that when I am hurting the most that God will not act on my behalf until he sees me (or anyone else) grovel enough. The closest I have come to finding at least tacit support for my position comes from Walter Brueggemann, in his study on Job. He examines what may be behind Job 42:6 when after a long and intense exchange with God, Job appears to respond with a beaten down, diminished self: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." However, Brueggemann writes that new critical interpretations may suggest that it is just the opposite. (As with any other author I quote, where bold print or italics is used, it is the way the author presented it in their work.)

> … the prayer is an act of an adult with an adult God. This person is not easily submissive, not directly defiant, but acts in part covertly so as not to be exposed to the raw power of holiness. Such prayer may leave unanswered the opening question of Satan to God: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9).
>
> The question and the book of Job recognizes that even in our own prayer, we are not single-minded and simple in relation to God. **At the very bottom, faith is a mix of *glad submissive trust* and *defiant self-respect* that will not easily yield, even in the face of holiness**. Job has said too much, lived too long, and suffered too deeply to yield himself to a God who is powerful but less than trustworthy. What Job knows is that he must appear before God. He must give answer for himself. But he must take care that after he

> answers, there is still "a self" that has not been abandoned. Thus 42:6 may be an exhibit of a *self before God* that offers an address to God that makes possible a genuine sense of self. (2008, 129)

Until I am convinced otherwise, when talking to God I intend to continue showing up with my best self that is endowed with the dignity bestowed on me by virtue of being made in God's image as well as the strong humility that Jesus demonstrated in the Incarnation. I intend to keep on praying as an adult with an adult God.

If You Can Groan, Then You Can Pray!

Let me now move on to another aspect of prayer that Brueggemann skillfully expounds. He begins by examining what he refers to as "Israel's most elemental prayer" (2008, xii). It is not even the prayer of an individual, never mind someone considered to be a great individual as many of these characters were, but of a suffering people who were but "uncredentialed slaves" (2008, xv). The "most elemental prayer" to which he is referring is found in Exodus 2:23a, "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out."

Brueggemann says there are two things he finds "remarkable" about this prayer. The first is that it was not addressed to anyone in particular, which is why he characterizes the prayer as "elemental." The second is that even though it was not addressed to anyone, the prayer is heard; it is heard by God. "Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Ex. 2:23b-25). In this elemental but remarkable prayer, Brueggemann notes how "God remembered! God looked! God saw!" (2008, xv).

What I personally find remarkable about this prayer is that it did not even consist of words. They merely "groaned." Can you groan? If you can groan then you can pray! After all, it is how the Holy Spirit prays in us and that certainly is good enough. In the notes from the translator of The Passion Translation (TPT) of the New Testament,

> We find three groanings in [Romans 8]. Creation groans for the glorious freedom of God's children (v. 22); we groan to experience the fullness of our status as God's children (v. 23); and the Holy Spirit groans for our complete destiny to be fulfilled (here) (v. 26). (2017, 771)

Speaking of prayer in general terms, Brueggemann quotes Friedrich Heiler, "who observed that prayer is, by its very character, 'primitive'" (2008, xvi). Brueggemann cites Heiler because he is of the opinion that, "Much Christian prayer is too polite and deferential. Christians, in my judgement, must continue to learn from Jews about the gravity required in prayer that bespeaks the legitimacy of the petitioner" (2008, xxii). I agree completely.

Honest Prayer Need Not Be Censored

A good example of what it looks and sounds like to pray as if God was not a fragile porcelain doll, if you will, can be seen in the 1997 film, *The Apostle.* Robert Duvall stars as the main character of a southern charismatic pentecostal preacher nick-named Sonny. Sonny is a complicated character. On the one hand he obviously loves God and tries to serve him as best as he knows. The movie opens up with him coming to the aid of a young couple involved in a fatal auto accident. The young woman appears to be dead already, and the young man who was driving the car is in very rough shape. They both know that he's dying, and Sonny leads him to accept Christ as his personal savior before succumbing to death.

On the other hand Sonny doesn't much care for rules, ecclesiastic oversight, or being held accountable by anyone or anything, including the rule of law. He gives in to his sinful passions by "womanizing," as he admits to the Lord in his prayer below. His wife is having an affair with the youth pastor and trying to have Sonny removed as pastor of the church. In a drunken and impulsive rage, Sonny attacked the youth pastor with a baseball bat, putting him in a coma before he eventually dies. It's not necessary to tell the entire plot here, just enough to put this particular scene in context. Sonny is talking to the Lord late at night while his mother is asleep downstairs.

> If you won't give me back my wife, give me peace. Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, P-E-A-C-E. Give me peace.
> I don't know who's been fooling me, you or the devil. I don't know … So I'm not even going to bring him into this. But I'm confused, I'm mad, I love you and I love you, but I'm mad at you, I'm mad at YOU!
>
> So tell me tonight, Lord, what should I do? Now tell me, should I lay hands on myself, what should I do? I know I'm a sinner and once in a while a womanIZER, but I'm your serVANT. Since I was a little boy you brought me back from the dead—I am your serVANT. (Pause)
>
> What should I do? Tell me. I always call you Jesus, you always call me Sonny. What should I do, Jesus? This is Sonny talking now.

Sonny pauses, stretches his neck and ear upward as if to listen better, and then apparently hearing nothing, turns away looking frustrated, or mad even, as he had already told God. "Alright," say's Sonny, who seems resigned that God's not talking to him tonight, at least for the moment. The scene transitions to his mother being awakened from her sleep when the phone rings. It is a neighbor calling to complain about all the hollering so late at night.

> **Neighbor**: "It sounds like you got a wild man down there carrying on and hollering and whatever. Who is that? Is that your son, or who is that?"

> **Mother**: "Oh, well that is my son. I'll tell ya, ever since he was an itty bitty boy, sometimes he talks to the Lord and sometimes he yells to the Lord, and tonight he just happens to be yelling at him."

Sonny's mother finally hangs up while the neighbor continues to rattle on, "… You know what time it is? HELLO?" The mother closes her eyes as if to go back to sleep, but has this very contented smile on her face as she listens to Sonny still praying loudly upstairs. He can be heard saying, "Now, I call you Jesus. Talk to Sonny. You don't talk to Sonny tonight it seems like …" The mother gently chuckles with delight as the scene comes to a close.

That movie scene is a perfect depiction of someone praying to God as "one friend talks to another," as Ignatian prayer teaches. (O'Brien, 2011, 95) It was so personal and uncomfortably honest to us who are listening in, it could have come right out of the Psalms! Sonny tells God that he is confused and mad at him. He reminds God that although he is a sinner, he is still his serVANT! Prayer is nothing if not honest, and honesty is essential in any relationship, including a relationship with God.

The Verdict Is In

Remember how Karl Rahner put petitionary prayer on trial and the charges that were brought against God himself? Here is Rahner's verdict:

> But we haven't yet even named the essential answer that God gave to man. The answer which he gives by him himself becoming a beggar in this world, by his becoming flesh and letting the cry of need rise from his own tormented heart into the disconsolate silence of our distant God. When the lamenting and weeping choir of world history's prayer of petition threatened to suffocate and to be mute in despair because this lamenting choir had already lasted too long and still no other answer came than the endless promises of the Day of judgment. Then the eternal God didn't order us with harsh words to continue praying until it pleased him to hear us in the coming of his eternal kingdom, rather he let his eternal Word become flesh to weep together with this lamenting choir: Lord, let your kingdom come, the kingdom in which all dreams are ended and you hear the weeping of the poor and the cry of the need of all human agony … The eternal word of divine

> jubilation became the cry of human need in time and dwelt among us. That is our answer to the charges against the prayer of petition. This answer is called Jesus Christ … If Jesus Christ is the answer to our question, then his prayer of petition is our doctrine. (1997, 55-56)

I am thankful that God would rather I be honest with him than merely polite or "reverent." As C. S. Lewis said in his book, *Letters to Malcolm*, "The prayer preceding all prayers is, 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to'" (2005, 82). Honest answers are borne out of honest questions. The prayer of petition Rahner refers to as our doctrine is based on Jesus' own prayers of petition. Listen to how Rahner adapted the Lord's Prayer to his own context:

> Our Father, you are in the heaven of my heart even when it seems to be a hell; hallowed be your name, may it be called upon in the deadly stillness of my perplexed silence; to us come your kingdom when all abandons us; your will be done even if it kills us because it is life, and what seems like a setting on earth is the rising of your life in heaven; give us this day our daily bread—let us ask for this also that we never mistake ourselves for you, not even in the hour when you are near us, rather, at least by our hunger, we notice that we are poor and unimportant creatures; free us from our guilt and protect us from the temptation of guilt and trial that is actually only one: not believing in you and the incomprehensibility of your love; but deliver us—deliver us from ourselves, deliver us into you, deliver us into your freedom and into your life. (1997, 12-13)

Chapter Four ~ Implications and Outstanding Questions

For a long time I tried to not ask God for anything. Asking and not receiving was damaging my relationship with the Lord, and I did not want that to happen. So whenever possible, I simply tried talking to God *about* things going on in my life, maybe the way I would with a friend. Knowing my friend could not do anything about my problems but listen, there were no expectations and thus, no disappointments. The problem was, however, knowing that God *could* do something about my problems and pretending that he *could not* was never far from my thoughts and feelings. There came a point, though, when I wondered, "But what if God really *cannot* do anything about some things?" After all, it is not like he never came through for me. But is it possible there are some things that God just cannot do? C. S. Lewis wrote,

> Up till now we have been tackling the whole question in the wrong way and on the wrong level. The very question "Does prayer work?" puts us in the wrong frame of mind from the outset. "Work": as if it were magic, or a machine—something that functions automatically. Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. (Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine.) In it God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary—not necessarily the most important one—from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He is. (2018, Kindle Location 79)

But what about the other side of prayer? A young mother spoke to me about her five year-old son after church one Sunday. I could tell that she was troubled by something during the entire worship service. Her son tended to get sick a lot, but that was not what was concerning her, for there was nothing seriously wrong, just the usual colds that kids in kindergarten pass around. It seems he could not quite shake them, for as soon as he would start to feel better, he'd come down with another nasty cold. His parents prayed with him of course, and encouraged him

to also pray and ask Jesus to help him feel better whenever he got sick. One day he told his mother that he did not believe in God anymore. When she asked him why he would say such a thing, he replied, "You told me to ask Jesus to help me feel better because Jesus always answers our prayers. Well I keep asking for his help, but it doesn't work. So why should I believe anymore. I don't think Jesus is real."

How sad is it when a five-year-old still believes in the magic of Santa Clause because he always gets what he asks for on Christmas morning, but no longer believes Jesus is real because he never got the one thing he kept asking for? Could you blame him, really? If that is all someone, especially a child, is told about prayer—that its only purpose is to ask God to do things for him—what else are they supposed to believe? Most people, including that little boy, will probably have a pretty distorted understanding of God, what prayer is and how it "works," or if it "works" at all. We already established that *asking* is at the heart of petitionary prayer. And yet, as C. S. Lewis stated so eloquently, there is much more to prayer than *asking* God for things. It is one thing to talk about prayer as asking things of God, but quite another when the tables are turned for God to ask things of us. Prayer is a two-way street, after all, except that God does not just ask, he commands.

In this chapter we are going to discuss some of the lingering implications of what we've encountered in this paper. We will also consider some of the issues that could not be resolved, or even adequately addressed within the scope of this paper. For there are many questions, no doubt, that remain outstanding. There are still issues having to do with the problem of evil and suffering that cause people to question the goodness of God. Is it really possible to change God's mind? Why did Jesus say we could ask for anything in his name when there are so many prayers

that go unanswered? Why does Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies? Really?! What are we to make of all these unresolved issues?

The focus of this chapter will be based more on experience than on research. That seems fitting since I said it would be one of the three approaches I would use to get after this huge topic. And still, we will not be able to satisfactorily resolve them in this chapter either. That is not the purpose. The purpose of this chapter is to acknowledge they exist. We won't be able to take them all on, but let us begin.

1. Praying *for* enemies when we would rather pray *against* them

> You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:43-48)

Jesus not only commands us to love those among our own ranks — family and friends, which admittedly can be hard enough — sometimes he goes much further by commanding that we also love *and* pray for our enemies who actively persecute us. Then he adds, "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Once again it sounds as if God's love is conditional. But it does not end there. Just a bit later in this same sermon, Jesus, at the end of the prayer he taught his disciples that included the petition, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12)—added the following: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14-15). Once again, it seems unfair (at least to me) that Jesus'

forgiveness would be based on the condition that we also forgive. And if we do not forgive others, including enemies we are expected to love and pray for, then he will not forgive us. Jesus is both insistent and consistent on this difficult teaching.

Just to be perfectly clear, when Jesus says to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you … forgive others their trespasses," he offers no qualifiers. He is not just talking about minor slights and offenses. He is saying to forgive everything, like the …

- spouse who broke your heart by committing adultery
- person who molested you as a child and stole your innocence
- pastor who exploited your trust and violated your vulnerability
- business partner who stole from you, leaving you bankrupt
- cyber-bully who sullied your reputation and publicly shamed you
- boss who abused their power, costing you your job and livelihood
- man who raped and left your daughter for dead
- parent that neglected or abandoned you
- friend who utterly betrayed you

This is not an arbitrary list I pulled out of thin air. They are actual offenses that people I know personally have suffered and struggled to forgive. They have all wrestled with Jesus' sense of fairness, as have I. Recently during an eight-day silent retreat, I spent a lot of time in contemplative prayer. I was also reading Thomas A. Hand's book, *Augustine On Prayer*. Hand explains that since Augustine never wrote anything that could be considered a treatise on prayer (though Letter 130 comes the closest), this book is a compilation of his prayers and things he taught about prayer in his sermons, letters, and other writings. Hand not only chose the excerpts, he also provides his own brief commentary. In a section on praying for our enemies, Hand writes, "We shall never understand the real meaning of Christian prayer until we have learned to love and to pray for our enemies …" This is followed by quotes taken from Augustine's sermons on the Psalms (Exp. 2 of Ps. 33.9; Ps. 39, 4).

> We must never attempt to turn God into an executioner, or to make him a minister of misfortune to our enemies. That would mean casting reflection on him. "For when you call on God to destroy your enemy, or when you would take pleasure in another's misfortune and call on God to bring it about, you are trying to make him a partaker of your own malice. And, if you make him a partaker of your own malice, you call on him, not to praise him, but to cast reflection on him, for you think that God is like yourself." (1986, 70-71)

I cannot say for sure that I was praying at the time, but I know I was thinking about things like this statement when a scene came to mind from a movie I had seen many years before. In *Stepmom,* Luke is Jackie's ex-husband, and after a lot of dating he gets serious with a much younger live-in girlfriend, Isabel, a cool and hip professional photographer with no children of her own. Jackie and Luke have two children—twelve year old Anna and Ben, who is probably around nine or ten. Real to life, there is quite a bit of tension between Jackie and Isabel, particularly around the children. She tries really hard to win the kids over, and though Ben is just a cute boy with no axe to grind, Anna, who is just a little bit older, is angry at her father for leaving and does not make it easy for Isabel at all. Jackie is threatened by Isabel and undermines her at every turn. Isabel is just as threatened by Jackie, the biological mother who makes parenting look easy.

The particular scene that came to mind shows Jackie and the kids on horseback, striding along slowly. Ben is talking to his mom about Isabel and says, "I think she's pretty," to which Jackie quips, "Yeah, if you like big teeth." After a brief pause, Ben says "Mommy?" Jackie responds, "Yes, sweetie." And Ben says, "If you want me to, I'll hate her." Jackie is speechless, but the expression on her face reveals the uncomfortable realization of how her negative attitude about Isabel is influencing her son. She has the power to turn Ben against her. It actually becomes even more complicated because what the movie viewer does not yet know is that at a

recent doctor's appointment, Jackie learned she has terminal cancer. It is only in looking back that one can also read into her look the possible thought that she knows she cannot afford to let Ben hate Isabel because she and Luke are now engaged. Isabel will most likely become the only mother her two kids will have after she is gone. (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120686/)

That is when it happened. Without even trying to do so, I could see Jesus in my mind's eye, or more like the eyes of my heart (Eph 1:18). He comes beside me and knowing every hurt I ever experienced in life says to me, "If you want me to, I'll hate them." Painful memories come to the surface along with the faces of those who caused some of those hurts. This was it, I thought. This was the opportunity I had fantasized about when reading through all those imprecatory psalms, asking God to pay back their enemies with a vengeance (see Pss. 69 and 109 for examples).

To my surprise, however, I was immediately horrified at the thought of Jesus hating anyone, especially because of me. Instead, to my great surprise I turned and said, "No Jesus, but I'll love them if you want me to." That's when I discovered that prayer is not me bringing Jesus over to my side, but Jesus patiently waiting for me to *want* to join him on his side of things.

Part of the retreat experience was participating in Mass every day at 5:00pm. I was a few days into the retreat by this time so I was becoming more familiar with the rhythm of the liturgy. We always said the Lord's Prayer just before receiving the Eucharist, and I noticed how the officiating priest would always preface it by saying, "… let us now dare to pray …" or "may we have to courage to pray …", which would be our cue to begin, "Our Father, who art in heaven …" However, praying that part, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass

against us," kept reminding me how God's unconditional love and forgiveness actually came with a pretty big condition, as mentioned above.

But on this particular day, just a few hours after that intense prayer and me telling Jesus, "I'll love them if you want me to," when coming to that part of the prayer, I knew I had a choice to make. I could just say the words, as I had been doing, or I could truly pray the words and mean it. I chose the latter and to my surprise began forgiving people who had injured me over the years. I forgave them by name. It came so freely I could not believe it. I always thought that when I came to that moment, it would be only because the Lord pinned me down till I cried "uncle" (slang for "Okay, I'll forgive"). But it was not like that at all. I was still busy forgiving people in my heart when I was served the Eucharist. It truly was a graced celebration!

2. If God truly is good, how can he allow there to be so much suffering and evil in the world?

Tish Harrison Warren, Episcopal priest and author, tells the story of a time her friends, Julie and Hunter, found themselves in a position no parent ever wants to find themselves. Their very young son was facing surgery. As Warren tells the story she writes,

> Like any parents whose child is going under the knife, my friends were anxious. Before the nurses wheeled their infant son into the operating room, Julie looked at Hunter and said, "We have to decide right now whether or not God is good, because if we wait to determine that by the results of this surgery, we will always keep God on trial." (2020, Kindle Location 400)

This story illustrates one of the biggest and most difficult problems regarding the long history of dashed hopes in the wake of Jesus' own promises of petitionary prayer; the question as to whether God is really good or not. Sooner or later we all have our worlds rocked along with our safely held beliefs and certainties. You will recall Warren's own personal crisis that brought this

particular book about. Her own personal crisis in the introduction to her book also takes place in a hospital, but for her it was the emergency room where she was hemorrhaging a great deal of blood. She was experiencing her first of two miscarriages just a month after losing her father and everything that was familiar to her. She writes,

> Theodicy names the abstract "problem of pain"—the logical dilemma of how God can be good and all-powerful even as horrible things regularly happen in the world. And it also names the crisis of faith that often comes from an encounter with suffering.
>
> This wasn't the first time that I'd wrestled with theodicy. But our difficult year—and perhaps simply growing older—made unresolved questions return with a vengeance and howl through the long, dark night.
>
> Theodicy is not merely a cold philosophical conundrum. It is the engine of our grimmest doubts. It can sometimes wither belief altogether. A recent survey showed that the most commonly stated reason for unbelief among Millennials and Gen Z-ers was that they "have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world." (2020, Kindle Location 327)

Closely related to the age old question as to why a loving and all-powerful God would allow there to be so much pain and suffering in the world—whether it is because of illness, natural disasters, random accidents, or at the hands of human beings—lies the issue of free will. Some of this has been touched upon already. In the last chapter I told the story of Sandy Hook and the interaction Philip Yancey had with the community at Newtown, CT. When a parent asked whether or not God could be trusted to protect her child, Yancey admitted that was the question he dreaded most. Nonetheless, in my opinion he answered it with truth and grace by being direct and telling her that she could not. (2013, Kindle Location 1135)

Yancey tells this and other stories like it in a book he wrote the year after Sandy Hook, *The Question That Never Goes Away.* The question he is referring to comes from the title of a

book he had written thirty years earlier, "*Where is God When it Hurts?*" Yancey writes,

> … as I pondered the question after Sandy Hook, to my surprise I felt my faith affirmed, not shattered. I know well the questions about a good and powerful God that rush to the surface when suffering strikes, and much of my writing has circled those questions. Yet, as theologian Miroslav Volf wrote on his blog the day after the Newtown shootings, "Those who observe suffering are tempted to reject God; those who experience it often cannot give up on God, their solace and their agony." The presence of so many in church on a wintry night proved his point.
>
> "You can protest against the evil in the world only if you believe in a good God," Volf also said. "Otherwise the protest doesn't make sense." (2013, Kindle Location 986)

And again later in the book he added yet another perspective, this time from classic literature.

> Dostoevsky presents the problem of evil in a style consistent with the Bible, offering not philosophical proofs but rather a story, the actual historical story of Immanuel. Choosing not to overwhelm human freedom, God instead joined us in the midst of evil and became one of its victims. Jesus did not eliminate evil; he revealed a God willing, at immense cost, to forgive it and to heal its damage. (2013, Kindle Location 1092)

3. What about free will?

When trying to think through how the goodness of God can be reconciled with all the pain and evil in the world, there is another layer that has to be addressed. Namely, what does it mean that God created human beings with the freedom to choose? It is all fine and well when God steps in to stop all the bad guys from committing atrocities, but do we really take the time to think through all the implications of a God that controls human beings like chess pieces on a board? Because the lines designating who and what God can and cannot, should and should not, control can become pretty blurry. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot expect God to alter the course of human events and ultimately, history, without it impacting every single human being on earth. It gets really complicated!

As I mentioned in chapter two, Mark Gregory Karris has done some great work on exploring the potential good as well as the potential pitfalls on the topic of petitionary prayer. I think some of his best work is on theodicy and free will.

> Theodicy is the attempt to make sense of how a good, loving, and omnipotent God is involved, or not involved, with the harsh reality of evil and suffering in the world. In this book, I seriously posit one specific model of theodicy. It is called "essential kenosis," a model put forth by Thomas Jay Oord in his book, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*. Many books address prayer, while others reflect on the topic of theodicy.
>
> Oord's approach centers on a few core propositions. First, he suggests that God's love is uncontrolling and non-coercive. In other words, God doesn't force his way into people's lives because that would be contradictory to his nature. Therefore, evil exists to the extent that it does because a loving and uncontrolling God, by his very nature, cannot forcefully stop the people he has created from choosing to commit evil acts. Oord also states that God never intervenes in the world unilaterally; he never acts alone, of his own accord, disregarding laws of nature and the free will of people. On the contrary, God always works through willing cooperation. (2018, Kindle Location 200)

Theodicy is a many-layered, age-old theological quandary that has stumped the best and brightest minds, and will probably continue to do so until God truly does make all things new. Karris spent the first five chapters of his book attempting to "deconstruct" what he perceives to be erroneous views of petitionary prayer that he attributes to prooftexting and interpreting many texts literally when they are not always intended to be read that way. He then aims to "reconstruct petitionary prayer in a way that prioritiz[es] God's Word, as well as integrat[es] reason, experience, and tradition." He then transitions to chapter six where he "begins to construct a coherent theodicy that will help us to develop a more mature model of petitionary prayer, one in which we can fully take part in our story with God" (2018, Kindle Location 1446).

When Karris talks about constructing a "coherent theodicy," he is setting the stage to propose a model for petitionary prayer he calls "conspiring prayer." He explains,

> The English word conspire comes from the Latin word *conspirare*, which literally means 'to breathe together' and figuratively 'to act in harmony toward a common end.' In today's usage, the word conspire has a negative connotation, which is to plot with someone to do something wrong or evil; but conspiring prayer combines both of the former meanings.
>
> Conspiring prayer is performed with God rather than to God. Conspiring prayer is a form of prayer where we create space in our busy lives to align our hearts with God's heart, where our spirit and God's Spirit breathe harmoniously together, and where we plot together to subversively overcome evil with acts of love and goodness (Romans 12:21). This subversive, sacred practice calls forth thankful, open-hearted listeners who humbly petition and partner with God to become divine echoes, committed to bring forth shalom in the world. (2018, Kindle Location 1874)

I believe Karris's model has potential in helping a great number of people who have become discouraged and disheartened about prayer, especially because of all the questions raised by theodicy, the goodness of God, and how all of that plays in to humankind being created with free will.

Chapter Five ~ Concluding Case for Petitionary Prayer

"Prayer is not just one function in life, not even the most important function; it is life itself. We are truly alive, truly human, only when our whole life is prayer" (Burrows, 2006, 35).

"… I will pray until I become prayer itself" (Psalm 109:4b, TPT).

We have been talking about prayer according to the Christian tradition in general and prayers of petition in particular. In our examination of the nature of prayer, we have been trying to understand what merit there may or may not be in thinking about prayer as something that "works." Up to this point, we have considered many related theological implications such as the Incarnation, whether or not God's mind can be changed through prayer, theodicy, human free will, as well as the diversity of people's lived experiences of prayer, ranging from the exuberant joy of knowing prayers answered to the beleaguering pain when no apparent answer comes.

In this final chapter, we will continue to drill down on those and other issues by asking more probing questions, and looking to the Holy Scriptures for sound teaching, relevant examples, and spiritual guidance, all of which is subject to interpretation.

What Constitutes Success in Prayer?

I do not know that it qualifies as an actual definition, exactly, but one of my favorite descriptions of prayer is by Michael Casey. He describes prayer as "something-else-that-seems-like-really-nothing-at-all." How is that for clarity? Here is the way he actually uses the phrase in his book, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer*: "To pray from the heart I need to leave [certain things] aside and give myself fully to this something-else-that-seems-like-nothing-at-all" (1996, 48). While it is true that we can commune with God anywhere and pray in spurts in the midst of our busy lives, to cultivate a rich prayer life also takes intentionality. It

means choosing to spend time in prayer when you could be doing something else, perhaps something more productive, or what feels to be a better use of your time.

That may seem simple enough, but it is that second part of Casey's phrase—"that-seems-like-really-nothing-at-all"—that makes things more challenging. We talked about whether or not it is helpful to think of prayer as something that "works." But Casey highlights the stark reality that it can often be more difficult to set apart time for prayer when there are so many other tasks that need our attention. Accomplishing those tasks can provide a great deal of gratification and feel like a much better use of our time. In *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*, Henri Nouwen, wrote,

> The discipline of prayer is the intentional, concentrated, and regular effort to create space for God … Prayer is being unbusy with God instead of being busy with other things. Prayer is primarily to do nothing useful or productive in the presence of God. (2010, Kindle Location 591)

In another book, *The Genesee Diary*, recounting the seven months he stayed at a Trappist Monastery, Nouwen talks about how the desire to do so grew over a long period of restlessness. He wanted to understand what drove his relentless compulsion to accept so many speaking engagements and fill his life with frenzied activity. So he deliberately stepped back from it all to ask the hard questions, sit in the discomfort of being "unbusy with God instead of being busy with other things," and listen to his life for answers.

> What was driving me from one book to another, one place to another, one project to another? What made me think and talk about "the reality of the Unseen" with the seriousness of one who had seen all that is real? What was turning my vocation to be a witness to God's love into a tiring job? These questions kept intruding themselves into my few unfilled moments and challenging me to face my restless self … But stepping back was not so easy. I had succeeded in surrounding myself with so many classes to prepare, lectures to give, articles to finish, phone calls to make, and letters to answer, that I had come quite close to believing that I was indispensable.

> When I took a closer look at this I realized that I was caught in a web of strange paradoxes. While complaining about too many demands, I felt uneasy when none was made. While speaking about the burden of letter writing, an empty mailbox made me sad. While fretting about tiring lecture tours, I felt disappointed when there were no invitations. While speaking nostalgically about an empty desk, I feared the day on which that would come true. (1976, 13-14)

In my own mind, I can see how Henri Nouwen's candid account of his personal struggle can serve as an apt illustration of the personal satisfaction that comes from doing work that yields tangible outcomes. Given the choice, it makes sense as to why so many of us would choose self-sufficiency and productivity over stillness, silence, or having to depend on others, even God. We like being in control and reaping the rewards, whether it be monetary or the praise and approval of others. Waiting upon God is difficult. But is that not why we ask things of God in the first place? We are asking him, in most cases, to do things we cannot do for ourselves. That is the very definition of grace! How does thinking about prayer as a grace compare with thinking of it as a transaction, which is what comes to mind when I think of it as something that "works."

Is Prayer Transactional?

In one sense, prayer most certainly has a transactional element to it. The dictionary provides three ways of defining the word, "transactional." Two out of the three assign definitions that I would consider to be conventional for human-to-human interactions, but not appropriate when it comes to human-to-Divine interactions. Transactional means, "of or relating to the process of conducting business" or "of or relating to an attitude in which personal interaction revolves around cost and benefit." Very business-like. A third definition is, "of or relating to personal or social interaction characterized by mutual influence and exchange," which

does seem to be more appropriate in both human-to-human interactions as well as human-to-Divine interactions (https://www.dictionary.com/browse/transactional).

Viewing prayers of petition as transactional in the worst sense of the word is to do so with expectations that God is obligated to deliver our desired outcomes in a somewhat reasonable time-frame. If prayer is something that, by definition, is supposed to "work," then how would you know if it is working? Would not some kind of evaluation process be necessary? And though many have attempted to do so, there is no foolproof way to quantify success or failure with any real consistency. Interpretation of whether a prayer has been answered or not tends to be very subjective. It is important that we think about prayer in the right way because faulty thinking lends itself to viewing prayer as something mechanical on one end of the spectrum or magical on the other, rather than pure grace deeply rooted in relationship.

I appreciate Bruce G. Epperly's thoughtful article, "Who Prays? A Process-Relational Reflection on Petitionary Prayer", where he offers what I consider to be a much better way to think about prayer. It reminds me of Mark Karris's "conspiring prayer" model. (2018, Kindle Location 1874) Epperly writes,

> As I ponder the nature and practice of prayer—as one for whom prayer and contemplation are at the heart of my spiritual journey, including most recently in prayers for our son during his treatment for germ-cell cancer—I ask the question: "who prays?" and, then, discover that this question leads to a number of other questions of theology, faith, and practice, such as: "When I pray for another person or for a personal concern, am I the primary initiator of the prayer? Or, is the Spirit of God praying through me, inspiring me to pray and channeling its energy through my unique personhood, in such a way that I am a passive conduit of the divine? Or, is the divine-human spiritual connection so integrated that as God inspires me to pray, my prayers are also God's prayers, articulated from my particular standpoint in space, time, and history?"
>
> Clearly, a process-relational understanding of prayer highlights both the diversity of prayer forms and the relational nature of prayer itself. While there is no strict definition

> of prayer, a process-relational vision of reality describes prayer as a spiritual act of "seeking the best for the world and particular creatures, in conscious or unconscious alignment with God's vision of wholeness." (2008, 16)

Epperly bases his thinking of divine and human call and response on Romans 8:15, 22-23, 26-27, while readily admitting there are limitations to building a theology of prayer based on these insights alone. (2008, 16) Others prefer taking a more scientific approach when trying to get a better handle on the cause and effect of prayer and outcomes. In the article, "Can Scientists Test The Effectiveness of Prayer?", Randal Rauser writes,

> … The question is whether we can test the effectiveness of petitionary prayer to see whether it really does make a difference. Many scientists seem to believe that we can: indeed, they have devised experiments to test the effectiveness of prayer. Truth be known, prayer has not fared very well in those experiments. Here is a summary of the deflationary results from one particular 2006 study:
>
> Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School and other scientists tested the effect of having three Christian groups pray for particular patients, starting the night before surgery and continuing for two weeks. The volunteers prayed for "a successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications" for specific patients, for whom they were given the first name and first initial of the last name.
>
> The patients were divided into three groups of approximately 600 people each: "those who knew they were being prayed for, those who were prayed for but only knew it was a possibility, and those who weren't prayed for but were told it was a possibility". After the study was completed, it yielded the following outcome:
>
> Results showed no effect of prayer on complication-free recovery. But 59 percent of the patients who knew they were being prayed for developed a complication, versus 52 percent of those who were told it was just a possibility. According to these results, the experimental group did not see a statistically significant improved outcome. Prayer, so this result would suggest, does not work. (2016, 68-69)

I realize this is only one study and, make of that what you will, my purpose for including this example is not to try to prove that prayer does not work or that it is even ineffective. This study could easily be countered with another that would show more favorable results. But that

simply is not the point. I would ask the reader to consider once again what I said at the outset of this paper—that prayer is as incomprehensible as the incomprehensibility of God. I would not be alarmed in the least if science could not conclusively quantify the effectiveness of prayer. Nor would I place my faith in prayer if it could prove otherwise. Prayer is not a sterile specimen that can be reduced to an experiment for observation. As Kathleen Norris learned from one of the desert fathers, Abba Agathon, prayer is "warfare till the last breath" (Norris, 2008, 96). Perhaps these are two ends of a spectrum, but let it be instructional as to prayer's elusive nature. Either way, consider something else Michael Casey said,

> Prayer is strange in being an activity where no success is possible … There is no perfect prayer-except insofar as it corresponds to one's real situation and represents a total turning toward God. The only prayer with any value is one that rises from the heart in response to the realities of life. There is no theoretical scale on which the relative worth of prayers can be measured. (1989, 24, 91).

Does this disappoint you? Does it discourage you from praying? I should hope not. My hope is that instead of losing confidence in prayer, it might bring a little more understanding and clarity to the kind of activity we engage in when we actually take participation in prayer seriously. When Casey described prayer as "something-else-that-is really-nothing-at-all," he was not minimizing prayer in the least, for he built on this line of thought by later adding,

> We are passive in prayer because prayer itself is active. Prayer cannot be measured on a scale of success and failure because it is God's work — and God always succeeds. When we believe we have failed at prayer, it is because we decided what shape our prayer should have, and are now frustrated that there is nothing more or less than the interior action of the Trinity at the level of being. This we cannot control; we can only reverently submit. (1989, 35)

British mystic and author Ruth Burrows supports Casey's assertion. In her book, *Essence of Prayer*, the Carmelite Nun writes,

> It becomes obvious that prayer has far more to do with what God wants to do in us than with our trying to 'reach' or 'realize', still less 'entertain' God in prayer. This truth eliminates anxiety and concern as to the success or non-success of our prayer, for we can be quite certain that, if we want to pray and give the time to prayer, God is always successful and that is what matters. (2006, 176)

It is humbling to know our place when engaging in prayer. And though God is the one in charge, which I find quite reassuring, it is wonderful to know that he invites us to partner with him. Our intention was never to prove or disprove whether or not prayer "works," no less to place our confidence in prayer based on scientific research, however effective that may be in many other systems of life. As stated in chapter one, to understand the inner workings of prayer, our approach would be biblically grounded, trinitarian in theology, and relational and experiential in praxis. Having established that once again, let us continue in that vein and suggest some conclusions.

Biblical Prayer is Steeped in Jewishness

Though time and space only affords us the opportunity to merely scratch the surface, we need to begin with the fact that prayer in the Bible is steeped in Jewishness. In *Jesus and Prayer*, Daniel J. Harrington informs us that,

> Jesus' teaching about prayer and his practice are deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition as expressed in the biblical Book of Psalms and in the prayers of Jews throughout the centuries. His direct address to God, his praise of God's work in creation and salvation history, and his emphasis on the prayer of petition were—and are—major elements in the Jewish prayer tradition. (2009, Kindle Location 367)

We shall see how helpful this proves to be as we proceed from here. It has already been noted that the distinguished Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann is an invaluable resource in helping us understand biblical prayer from the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures. "Whereas much of the church's delineation of the God of the gospel is given in the more static

terms of Western philosophy, this God—not surprisingly—is cast in Jewish terms" (2008, 132). I would hope that is obvious to most Christians when reading the Bible, but I will not assume that it is. It is worth keeping Harrington's points in mind as we consider how and why Israel prayed as they did because, as Brueggemann points out, it is …

> determined by the particularity of the God to whom they pray. And because Israel, in the Old Testament, prays to the God of the exodus who is the creator of heaven and earth, we will not be surprised that Israel prays in a certain way that is required and permitted by the character of the God addressed. (2008, xii)

As will become evident when we turn our full attention to the New Testament, and particularly to Jesus, Harrington makes another astute observation.

> These Jewish prayers have been composed and practiced in a theological framework that is typical not only of Jewish prayer but also of the prayers that we find in the New Testament and the Christian tradition. These Jewish prayers balance the transcendence of God as Creator and Lord with the immanence of God, who may be addressed directly and who can and does enter into human affairs. (2009, Kindle Location 411)

The First Recorded Prayer in The Bible

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, let us begin with the Hebrew Scriptures, and more specifically, Abraham and Genesis 18. This first recorded prayer in the Bible presents a wonderful example of intercessory prayer. The following introduces the first of three scenes.

> The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. (vv. 1-2)

In this fascinating account of the Lord appearing as three angels, Christian interpretation has long held to believing this was a theophany; a manifestation of the Holy Trinity. This interpretation was brilliantly captured and perpetuated by the famous fifteenth century Russian

Orthodox icon by Andrei Rublev in what is known as "The Rublev Trinity." (Gabriel Bunge, The Rublev Trinity, 2007)

In the first scene (vv. 1-15) the three men/angels reveal to Abraham that in a year's time his wife Sarah would give birth to a son. Having just prepared a meal for the men/angels, Sarah was overhearing all of this from the entrance of the tent and was so amused by it that she could be heard laughing to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" Though Sarah denied it, the Lord called her out for laughing and then lying about it, and said "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (vv. 13-14a). The next scene shows the men/angels leaving there for Sodom with Abraham in tow (vv. 16-21). Along the way, acknowledging that God had chosen him to become a great nation that would bless all other nations, "The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?'" and proceeded to tell him of his intentions. He was going to see for himself if the outcry against the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was true and if so, destroy them for their "very grave sin."

We have now arrived at the third and final scene where Abraham engages the Lord (vv. 22-33). He blatantly bargains with God, calls his character into question, and essentially says (at least this is my interpretation), "Oh come on, Lord, you're better than this!" What he actually says is,

> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? (v. 25)

Abraham's not so subtle indignation with God makes me feel better for all the times I said, "If I were God …" But Brueggemann's interpretation is far more generous.

> The exchange exhibits Abraham as a daring man of faith. More importantly, it presents YHWH as a ready and available partner in the free play of prayer in which the destiny of the world hangs in the balance and is under intense negotiations. (2008, 8)

The opening verse of this section never struck me as anything more than a very ordinary statement, "So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord" (v. 22). Brueggemann, however, makes a stunning claim in regard to this seemingly plain, nondescript verse by saying, "The introduction is of peculiar interest because it may offer us one of the most important comments in all of Scripture concerning prayer" (3). He says that on the surface, when approaching God with his petition, Abraham appears to assume somewhat of an inferior position. He is deferential and reticent as he musters up the courage to ask God to change his mind. Brueggemann defends his bold claim this way:

> Such a construal of this meeting, however, is called into question by the fact that verse 22 contains a "scribal correction" (noted in the NRSV as 'another ancient tradition'). In fact that alternative tradition suggests that an earlier form of the narrative had "YHWH standing before Abraham," to suggest that Abraham was the senior partner and YHWH a deferential suppliant, with roles reversed. Thus the "earlier text" proposes that the positions of the two parties are reversed; Abraham holds the upper hand in the transaction, as though YHWH were approaching Abraham, "hat in hand." This textual change may be the most important matter in this narrative, for it invites us to rethink the "posture of prayer" and the way we may be situated before God, as deferential suppliant (as is usual) or as senior party to the transaction with immense gravitas. This positioning of Abraham perhaps better prepares us for the prayer of Abraham that is to follow … (2008, 3-4)

Abraham begins by asking God if he would relent from destroying the whole city if only fifty righteous men could be found there, and God agrees to this request. Abraham then attempts to talk God down, first to forty-five righteous men, then forty … thirty … twenty. Each time God capitulates to Abraham's terms, even when he dares to ask once more, "'Oh do not let the

Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'" Brueggemann continues to explain his position.

> The scribes have altered the text to bring the narrative into conformity with the conventional theological opinion. But against the judgment of the scribes, we may at least pause to entertain the dramatic alternative, that in some contexts of prayer the petitioner is bold enough and daring enough to proceed as though the petitioner held the initiative to which God must respond. In a dramatic encounter such as the one offered here, there is no excessive deference before God; rather, there is an urgency that is grounded in indignation, which marks the tone of the prayer that follows. Abraham, YHWH's best friend, stands before God with some sense of entitlement, a daring posture for prayer, but one grounded in the interactive, covenantal relationship that Abraham has with YHWH. (2008, 4)

Though ultimately Abraham was not successful in his attempt to deter God from destroying the city, this exchange would at least appear to demonstrate how willing God was to have this interaction with Abraham and to show he was open to having his mind changed. Why else would God even bother to let him in on his plans when he said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (v. 17).

> In YHWH, Abraham finds a "prayer partner" who is competent and ready to be engaged. While that particular prayer of Abraham did not "work," it stands at the beginning of a long history of intercession in which the faithful must hold up their end of "the bargain." (2008, 10)

In full disclosure, I do not know that I agree with Walter Brueggemann's conjecturing about the role of the scribes on Gen. 18:22 and whether or not it was Abraham standing before the Lord or the Lord standing before Abraham, with all its implications as to who was being deferential to whom. Although I am not comfortable with it, it does at least seem to be a viable interpretation that warrants a fair hearing. What I cannot accept, however, is characterizing prayer as "the word that conquered God." This is the title of a sermon preached by Rev. Clarence Edward Macartney (1879-1957) on this, and other biblical passages, including Jacob

and the Syro-Phoenician woman whom he dubs, "the mother who conquered Christ." (1987, 10, 14) He preaches,

> When we come to select examples and illustrations from the Bible which prove and demonstrate our proposition that prayer is the word that conquers God, our only embarrassment is the riches of the Bible in that respect, and our only difficulty is to decide what instances of God-conquering prayer to select. (10)

Rev. Macartney was no "snake oil preacher." He pastored the prestigious First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburg, PA for twenty-seven years! In *Classic Sermons on Prayer*, this sermon is one among many truly great sermons preached by those considered to be giants among protestant pulpiteers, such as Dwight L. Moody, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and Alexander Whyte. Nonetheless, I strongly object to the viewpoint that petitionary prayer conquers God! In fact, scripture tells us that as believers in Jesus Christ we are "more than conquerors" over hardship, persecution, or any number of ways that peril and suffering threaten to "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." And why is that? It is because of the supreme fact that Jesus "was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." No, we do not conquer God through prayer or by any other means. The ironic truth is that even though God could easily conquer us if he wanted to, it is through the prayers of his Son Jesus that we are able to conquer anything that would come between us! (see Rom. 8:33-38)

Prayer Is Conversation, Not Conquest

In order to further explain my position, we need to briefly revisit the question as to whether or not God's mind can be changed as a result of our prayers. The Genesis account that Brueggemann expounded would indicate that God's willingness to have a serious conversation with Abraham demonstrated an openness on his part to having his mind changed regarding the

actions planned against Sodom. We know that in this particular instance, Abraham did not prevail.

We already discussed this deeply theological matter in chapter three, but I would like to address it from a more practical point of view. But first, along with the question as to whether or not God's mind can be changed, there is another closely related issue at hand. The question is—and it is a fair one—that since God already knows what we are going to ask him before we even do so (Matt. 6:8), why bother asking? Is it just about going through the motions? At the heart of the question lies the nagging sense that our prayers do not really matter. For a lot of people, this is a real source of discouragement and a serious impediment to prayer. But it does not have to be that way. I would like to illustrate my point by relaying a personal experience that I believe will relate to many. I remember the day my wife called to let me know that our daughter's boyfriend wanted to set up a time to speak with the two of us on the phone. We knew the relationship was most probably moving toward marriage, so we both anticipated that was most likely the purpose for this call and why he wanted to talk to us together. When he called us later that evening we were not surprised that he was indeed calling to ask our blessing to propose to our daughter.

The fact that we were correct in our assumption did not make the conversation any less meaningful. In fact, he probably already knew that we knew or at least suspected the reason for his call. We also knew his asking was out of respect and courtesy, and had we not given our blessing, we have no doubt he would have proposed anyway. So why ask and why grant the blessing if for all intents and purposes the outcome is already a forgone conclusion? Was it all a charade? No, because it was still necessary to have the conversation. It was more than needlessly going through the motions. It was the right thing to do and certainly the best way to

start a relationship with his future in-laws. We got to ask him if he loved our daughter. Even though it was obvious he did, it was still wonderful to hear him say how much he loved her out loud. It was an important conversation that my wife and I will always cherish. If that is true in human relationships, then given what we learned about Jesus' teaching method of beginning with human relationships, why wouldn't it be true in our relationship with our heavenly Father?

Besides, does Jesus always know what we are going to ask him? God does not have a bad memory. When we confess our sins to him he chooses to remember our sins no more. Isaiah 43:25 states, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." If God can choose to *not* remember certain things, is it not possible that he could also choose to not know exactly what or how we are going to ask something of him? Even though we were pretty sure of what the conversation was going to be about, none of us knew how the flow of that conversation would actually unfold until we engaged with each other and began to talk. And so it is with prayer. God treasures the conversation.

Psalms: The Judeo-Christian Prayer Book

Before turning our attention more fully to Jesus and the New Testament, it would be a gross omission if I did not say something about the Book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter. The Psalms give voice and language for a wide range of human emotions and situations, such as hope to hopelessness, grief and sadness to joyful praise, steadfast love to intense hatred, fear of, and protection from enemies to wanting scorch-the-earth style vengeance on those same enemies. And all with God's help! Of course so many of those emotions and situations are accompanied by prayers of petition and heart-felt cries for help.

> Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer … I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live (Pss. 4:1; 116:1).

Author and poet, Kathleen Norris wrote in *The Cloister Walk*, "In expressing all the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the Psalms act as good psychologists. They defeat our tendency to try to be holy without first being human" (1996, 96). That is a good distinction to keep in mind. In *Prayer in the Night*, Tish Harrison Warren tells us that,

> John Calvin called the Psalms "the anatomy of all the parts of the soul." He says there is no human emotion that "anyone finds in himself whose image is not reflected in this mirror. All the griefs, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hopes, cares, anxieties, in short all the disquieting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated, the Holy Spirit hath here pictured exactly." (2020, 56)

In another fine book by Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, though I do not know if the concept is entirely original with him, he organizes the Psalms into …

> three quite general themes, poems of orientation, poems of disorientation, and poems of new orientation. It is suggested that the Psalms can be roughly grouped this way, and the flow of human life characteristically is located either in the actual experience of one of these settings or is in movement from one to another. (1984, 19)

I find identifying this pattern helps me to be able to track with the dynamic flow of all the emotional ups and downs in the Psalms. Sometimes a single psalm will have two or all three movements in it. But in more general terms, for example, Wisdom or Song of Creation Psalms would fall under Psalms of Orientation; Psalms of Lament or Penitential Psalms, under Psalms of Disorientation; and Songs of Praise or Thanksgiving would be considered Psalms of New Orientation. As helpful as it is to see the humanization and orientations of the Psalms, there is an altogether different way that some have interpreted and prayed with the psalms.

The last book that theologian and Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, was a little book called *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*, where he wrote the following:

> If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms … we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart. (1970, 14-15)

It is astonishing to me that Bonhoeffer wrote this from a prison cell after being arrested for his role in a plot to assassinate Hitler. During the time my wife was ill, I was riding my bike along the ocean. I was praying for Debbie, but I was doing so from the poverty of my heart. I got stuck dwelling on the problem, as I think many are prone to do, becoming more and more anxious about all the unknowns. Dwelling on something is a form of contemplation, except I was contemplating about all the wrong things. At one point my eye caught a street sign that said "Ocean View." I realized I was so fixated on the situation that I was not even taking in the beauty of the ocean or the spaciousness of clear blue sky. People dwell on a street called "Ocean View" so that they might enjoy what a lot of people would love to have—a view of the ocean whenever they want. That snapped me out of my funk and reminded me that if I want hope instead of despair then I have to be looking in the right place. The psalmist said, "I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" (Ps. 16:8).

***Totus Christus*: St. Augustine and the Psalms**

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) had a very unique perspective when it came to the

psalms. It was not altogether new to him as many of the Church Fathers before him viewed the Psalms christologically. Augustine, however, in his exhaustive, multi-volume work, Commentaries on the Psalms ("*Enarrationes in Psalmos")*, took it to a whole new level by developing the theological concept known as *Totus Christus*, Latin for "the Whole Christ."

Michael Cameron is a widely recognized authority on Augustine's extensive work on the Psalms and *Totus Christus*. In his contribution to the formidable work, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Cameron writes,

> He echoed the work of previous writers on the Psalms such as Hilary of Poitiers, but turned this inherited tradition to his own use. Especially striking is his development of *Totus Christus*, the "whole Christ" which while based on Tyconius went beyond him in important ways. On the whole his psalm exegeses were freshly minted works prepared for his local situation …
>
> Based on the accommodation of Genesis 2:24 "the two shall become one flesh" to the "great mystery" of Christ and the church and Ephesians 5:31–32, Augustine developed the principle of the single voice: "if 'two in one flesh' why not 'two in one voice'?" (30[2].1.4; 68.2.1; 138.21; 142.3). For Augustine the voice of the *totus Christus* is the radiating hermeneutical center of the Psalms. (1999, 291-292)

And then again in his article, "*Totus Christus* and the Psychagogy of Augustine's Sermons", Cameron writes,

> Christ transposed all of humanity into himself, or in Augustine's adapted biblical language, "transfigured us in himself." … This transposition was effective for *spiritales* and *parvuli* alike; the grace of mystical union achieved at a stroke became the basis for advancing to the realm of spirit. Christ's humanity was made the way to his divinity; he himself was Jacob's ladder from the sensible to the spiritual. For this reason Augustine's Christianity is radically, and ineradicably, christological. (2005, 65)

Drawing from Cameron's extensive work on this topic, Protestant theologian J. David Moser provides a very fine synthesis of Augustine's christology in the Psalms and the formation

of *Totus Christus*. In "*Totus Christus*: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology", Moser writes,

> In [Augustine's] exegesis of Scripture, he learned that Christ is intimately joined to the Church so that he suffers with its members when they are persecuted, even after his ascension. But Christ does not suffer with the Church in the same way that the Church suffers, because the two are not numerically identical. Augustine expounds this idea in detail in his second exposition of Psalm 30. He characterizes Christ's suffering with his Church as the "wonderful exchange" *(admirabile commercium),* where Christ suffers for the Church both in his body on the cross and in the present with the Church. He thinks the Psalms reveal this teaching. And he developed that notion from his study of Paul's use of the Old Testament, where he learned that Christ and his sacrifice form the interpretive center of Scripture, including the Psalms. That is to say, Scripture itself warrants his Christological readings of the Psalms. Moreover, Augustine adopted a "prosopological" form of exegesis, a rhetorical strategy that discerns different speakers in one and the same text. In this way, Augustine regularly discerned Christ as the speaking subject of the Psalms who can speak in the place of the psalmist. In his second exposition of Psalm 30, Augustine asks whether Christ is able to experience fear. His solution is striking. Christ indeed speaks in this psalm as one who fears, but it is not he himself who fears. Rather, he fears *in us,* the Church. (2020, 13)

Finally, in his article, "Augustine and the Psalms", then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was able to succinctly summarize Augustine's rare ability to capture the powerful force of finding his story in the story of Christ as told in the Psalms. Speaking of Augustine's own perspective and practice, he wrote,

> The psalm is a meaningful narrative structure, a history of the soul. And souls only have a history in conversation with God … Briefly, the notion of the Psalm as proposing a structure for telling a unified story of the soul depends on the insight in the *Ennarationes* that the Psalms represent the unifying of the divine and the human voice of Christ. (2004, 17, 27).

Jesus Preserves and Transforms Prayer

I think the case could be easily made that the Psalms told a unified story of Jesus. Jesus is so identified with the Psalms that he prayed from them three different times while dying on the cross. But we are still looking at the broader picture. Daniel J. Harrington wrote,

> The Jewish prayers composed in Jesus' time drew freely on the words and images in the biblical psalms and placed them in new combinations and new contexts. To a large extent the biblical Book of Psalms shaped the language and theology of Jewish prayer in Jesus' time. (2009, Kindle Location 384)

In keeping with Jewish tradition we can see Jesus continuing the practice of balancing the transcendence and immanence of God we referred to earlier. We see it in the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught his disciples.

> The more familiar Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13) adapts the opening address to the more common Jewish title for God in prayer, "Our Father in heaven." The pronomial adjective "our" alludes to God's presence among us (God's immanence), while "in heaven" reminds us of the cosmic scope of God's reign (God's transcendence). (2009, Kindle Location 466)

Of course, by virtue of the fact that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, he also added new dimensions that reshaped his Jewish roots of prayer. For instance, Joachim Jeremias tells us in *The Prayers of Jesus*, that in the entire Old Testament, God is only referred to as Father fifteen times, and when they did so, it was to convey honor and praise to him not only as Creator, but also for his tenderness. In contrast, "No less than one hundred and seventy times in the gospels, we find the word 'Father' for God on the lips of Jesus" (1967, 29). As noted earlier, Harrington refers to Jesus' prayer in John 17, normally known as Jesus's High Priestly Prayer, as "The Prayer of God's Son" (2009, Kindle Location 639). Jesus addresses God as Father six times in this prayer; including once as "Holy" (v. 11) and once as "Righteous" (v. 25). His name is indeed hallowed by Jesus in addressing God as "Father … Holy Father … Righteous Father." It was even more significant when Jesus referred to God as "*My* Father" because it was an expression of his unique relationship with the Father. It is noteworthy that according to Jeremias,

> In his public preaching, Jesus clarified the nature and action of God in parables about the conduct of an earthly father (Luke 15:11-32; Matt. 7:9-11par. Luke 11:11-13, etc.); he kept the direct designation of God as "my Father" for his teaching to the disciples. (1967, 53)

That Jesus would only use "my Father" in the privacy of his closest friends would imply he was sharing a deep intimacy with them. It is also significant that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he instructed them to address God as "*Our* Father." There is one final aspect that needs to be mentioned in the context of how Jesus embraced Jewish tradition while at the same time revolutionizing it. That Jesus referred to God as "my Father" was new and different. Jeremias points out that the closest anyone ever got to referring to God that personally was by using the phrases "heavenly Father" or "God of my Father," but even then, examples are scant. "There is as as yet no evidence in the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism that 'my Father' is used as a personal address to God" (1967, 29). But Jesus went even further than that when he used "Abba," the Aramaic word for Father. Again, Jeremias writes,

> We can see from all this why God is not addressed as *Abba* in Jewish prayers: to the Jewish mind it would have been disrespectful and therefore inconceivable to address God with this familiar word. For Jesus to venture to take this step was something new and unheard of. He spoke to God like a child to its father, simply, inwardly, confidently, Jesus's use of *abba* in addressing God reveals the heart of his relationship with God.
>
> One often reads (and I myself believed it at one time) that when Jesus spoke to his heavenly father he took up the chatter of a small child. To assume this would be a piece of inadmissible naivety. We have seen that even grown-up sons addressed their father as *abba*. So when Jesus addresses God as *abba* the word is by no means simply an expression of Jesus' familiarity in his converse with God. At the same time, it shows the complete surrender of the Son in obedience to the Father (Mark 14:36; Matthew 11:25f.). (1967, 62)

When I was a kid, my father left me. It is true that he left our whole family to fend for ourselves, but I can only speak to the giant hole he left in my heart when he left *me*. As if it were

not enough that I get to know Jesus and have such an intimate relationship with him, I love him all the more that he would share his Abba with me. "Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them'" (Jn. 14:23). These are among the most beautiful words I have ever known. The apostle Paul made it abundantly clear that when Jesus spoke to his Father in this new way, that he meant it was for all of his children and that it is still true for us today. Hallelujah!

> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6); For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Rom. 8:14-16)

CONCLUSION: The Lord's Prayer

It is good that we conclude with The Lord's Prayer. If you ask a congregation, or any group of gathered believers to pray the Lord's Prayer together, it is more than likely they are going to be most familiar with Matthew's version in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:9-13). Though Luke records a shorter version in response to his disciples' request that Jesus teach them how to pray (Lk 11:1-4), "Both versions are prayers for the full coming of God's kingdom. Both versions were used in early Christian communities—Matthew's version by Jewish Christians, and Luke's version by Gentile Christians." (Harrington, 2009, Kindle Location 429)

The Lord's Prayer is itself a prayer of petition. It is not uncommon to hear preachers and Bible teachers say that the prayer should actually be called the Disciples Prayer, since Jesus taught it to his disciples to pray, but I think it is rightly called the Lord's Prayer since it originated with him. Also, as N.T. Wright points out in *Simply Christian*, "At every point, the [Lord's] prayer reflects what Jesus himself was doing in his work … The prayer is, so to speak,

Jesus-specific" (2006, 160). Going from Luke's shortened version, Harrington gets to the heart of the prayer and succinctly breaks it down.

> It contains two petitions for the full coming of God's kingdom (Luke 11:2) that use second-person singular language ("your name ... your kingdom") and three petitions for sustenance, forgiveness, and protection during the kingdom's coming (11:3-4) that are cast in first-person plural language ("give us ... forgive us ... do not bring us").
>
> The two "you" petitions concern what was the central theme of Jesus' own preaching and activity: the kingdom of God. Most of Jesus' parables and many of his other teachings challenged his hearers to discern the presence of God's kingdom among them and to look forward in hope to its future fullness. His many healings and exorcisms are best understood as previews or anticipations of the fullness of God's kingdom. (2009, Kindle Location 448)

In a less than succinct, but interesting analysis, D. Brent Laytham asks in his article, "'But If . . . by the Spirit of God': Reading Matthew's Lord's Prayer as Spirit Christology", "Where does Christ fit in the Lord's Prayer, what role does he play?" At first that struck me as the oddest question, but the answer to his own question demonstrates the depths of the prayer as well as the one teaching the prayer.

> Classically, the church has recognized that Jesus is more than just an authoritative lecturer on spirituality, dispensing sage guidance in Matthew 6 on how to fast, pray, and give alms. Rather, Jesus is the preeminent prayer. He prays in such a way that "word and life corresponded perfectly with one another," in such a way that *his life is a prayer*—simultaneously one grand doxology to the Father and an unending intercession for us. In this way, Jesus doesn't just pray for us, but prays in our place, standing where we should but wouldn't, offering what we ought but won't.
>
> Put simply, Jesus prays in our place by the power of the Holy Spirit so that *by the power of that same Spirit* we can pray in and through Jesus. More specifically, *by the power of the Holy Spirit* Jesus prays and lives *the Lord's Prayer* in our place so that we can pray *and live it* in and through him *by the power of the same Spirit.* (2018, 29 italics in original)

Given the above context, I think the author could have just as well asked, "Where does the Holy Spirit fit in the Lord's Prayer, what role does he play?" We learned from the two passages I quoted above that the Spirit's role enables us to cry, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:14-16). In addition to that, Rom. 8:26 tells us the Holy Spirit intercedes for us just as Heb. 7:25 tells us the risen, exalted Christ intercedes for us as well. When the Bible teaches us to "not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6), it helps to know that we never pray alone or in our own strength! In his book, *Invitation to a Journey*, Robert Mulholland writes,

> If we have not first entered into the posture of prayer and supplication, our requests tend to be very narrowly focused upon our own agenda and have their center in our self-referenced matrix of life. The posture of prayer and supplication, however, places us and our situation into the deeper matrix of God's presence and purpose. While still shaped by our perception of the situation, our requests begin to become the bridge between our own desires and the purposes of God. When this happens, our requests become the practice of forbearance. We begin to place the situations of our lives into the deeper matrix of God's presence and purpose and find that we can release our tenuous control and fragile ordering of life to God. (1993, 90-91)

Mulholland seems to be echoing what Bonhoeffer said above. And when he refers to the "deeper matrix of God's presence and purpose," it occurs to me that he could have just as well been referring to the in-breaking of the reign of God's kingdom for which we are to align our will, prayers, and seek above all else (Matt. 6:33). When Laytham asked "Where does Christ fit in the Lord's Prayer, what role does he play?", I thought he answered it well. But in *Simply Christian*, I think N.T. Wright adds even more.

> It was, after all, Jesus who was going around saying it was time for the Father's name to be honored, for his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. It was Jesus who fed the crowds with bread in the desert. It was Jesus who forgave sinners and told his followers to do the same. It was Jesus who walked, clear-eyed, into the "time of trial," the great tribulation that was rushing like a tidal wave upon Israel and the world, so that by taking

> its full force on himself others might be spared it. And it was Jesus who was inaugurating God's kingdom, exercising God's power, and dying and rising to display God's glory. The "Lord's Prayer," as we call it, grows directly out of what Jesus was doing in Galilee. And Gethsemane, too; the prayer looks directly forward to what he achieved in his death and resurrection.
>
> The prayer is therefore a way of saying to the Father: Jesus has (in the image he himself used) caught me in the net of his good news. The prayer says: I want to be part of his kingdom-movement. I find myself drawn into his heaven-on-earth way of living. I want to be part of his bread-for-the-world agenda, for myself, and for others. I need forgiveness for myself—from sin, from debt, from every weight around my neck—and I intend to live with forgiveness in my heart in my own dealings with others. (Notice how remarkable it is that, at the heart of the prayer, we commit ourselves to live in a particular way, a way we find difficult.) And because I live in the real world, where evil is still powerful, I need protecting and rescuing. And, in and through it all, I acknowledge and celebrate the Father's kingdom, power and glory. (2006, 160)

We have spent a lot of time exploring the baffling blessings of petitionary prayer in this paper. I have always had trouble understanding why Jesus would make such an audacious promise as he did when he said, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (Jn. 14:13-14). Especially when it is obviously not true. It simply does not work that way. That contradiction remains baffling to me. But the blessing is that if he would tell us, not once, but time after time to make the *ask*, it can only mean that he is always in the posture to *give*. After all, "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom. 8:31-32).

Anne Lamotte certainly takes Jesus up on it. I cannot help but think how delighted Jesus must be when he hears prayers like this:

> When I pray, which I do many times a day, I pray for a lot of things. I ask for health and happiness for my friends, and for their children. This is okay to do, to ask God to help them have a sense of peace, and for them to feel the love of God. I pray for our leaders to act in the common good, or at least the common slightly better. I pray that aid and

> comfort be rushed to people after catastrophes, natural and man-made. It is also okay to ask that my cat have an easy death. Some of my friends' kids are broken and the kids' parents are living in that, and other friends' marriages are broken, and every family I love has serious problems involving someone's health or finances. But we can be big in prayer, and trust that God won't mind if we pray about the cat and Jax's tender heart (her grandson). Is God going to say, "Sorry, we don't have enough for the cat"? I don't think so.
>
> I ask for help for this planet, and for her poor, and for the suffering people in my little galaxy. I know even as I pray for help that there will be tremendous compassion, mercy, generosity, companionship, and laughter from other people in the world, and from friends, doctors, nurses, hospice people. I also know that life can be devastating, and it's still okay to be pissed off at God: Mercy, schmercy. I always want the kid to live. I can picture God saying: "Okay, hon. I'll be here when you're done with your list." Then He goes back to knitting new forests or helping less pissy people until I hit rock bottom. And when I finally do, there may be hope. (2012, Kindle Location 121)

Joachim Jeremias said, "When The Lord's Prayer was given to the disciples, prayer in Jesus' name began (Jn. 14:13f.; 15:16; 16:23)" (1967, p. 94). I still grapple with the "ask me for *anything*" part. But it helps knowing that every time we pray, we can ask God for and about *anything*, and as long as it is truly in Jesus' name—which is not the equivalent of rubbing a rabbits foot superstitiously—it means that Jesus is all in too. Just ask Anne Lamotte. For the same Jesus that died with prayer on his lips is the same Jesus that lets us call his Father our Father, our Abba, and invites us to ask audacious things of him so long as we include his name. As someone who adopted two children, I know what it means to give your name to another.

In essence, his signature is on every request we bring to the Father. He not only calls us co-laborers and co-heirs with him (1 Cor. 1:9; Rom. 8:17), it is as if he is willing to co-sign our requests. That obviously does not guarantee outcomes, but it does mean that we are true partners, that he is in it with us. And every time we pray in his name the rule and reign of his

kingdom gets a little closer because we are praying that everything that is true in heaven will also be true on earth, and so much more. Joachim Jeremias provides a wonderful summary.

> If one ventures to summarize in *one* phrase the inexhaustible mystery of the few sentences in the Lord's prayer, there is an expression pre-eminently suitable which New Testament research has especially busied itself with in recent decades. That phrase is "eschatology becoming actualized." This expression denotes the age of salvation now being realized, the consummation bestowed in advance, the in-breaking of God's presence into our lives. Where men dare to pray in the name of Jesus to their heavenly Father with childlike trust, that he might reveal his glory and that he might grant to them already today and in this place the bread of life and the blotting out of sins, there in the midst of the constant threat of failure and apostasy is realized, already now, the kingly rule of God over the life of his children. (1967, 107)

After reading this I am utterly convinced that our prayers of petition are far too small. They are short-sighted and unimaginative and will remain that way until we pray knowing that the Spirit of Jesus is praying in, with and for us. Somehow God deigned that it is through the dynamic combination of our prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ that God works. (Phil. 1:19) I believe Dallas Willard was right when he said the following, and if the general idea of this paper could be boiled down to one sentence, this would be it: "He [Jesus] teaches us how to be in prayer what we are in life and how to be in life what we are in prayer" (1998, 195). I do not know if that will satisfy those who want to continue to believe "prayer works." But it does satisfy what I believe to be how God and humans work together in everyday life. "For at last I believe life itself is a prayer, and the prayers we say shape the lives we live, just as the lives we live shape the prayers we say …" (Loder, 1981, 19)

Works Cited

Aschenbrenner, George A. *Stretched for Greater Glory: What to Expect From the Spiritual Exercises.* Loyola Press, 2004.

Augustine. *The Confessions: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Translated by Maria Boulding, I.1. New City Press, 1997.

———, *Letters*. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century.* Translated by Roland Teske, S.J., II, 1-4. New City Press, 2003.

———, *Expositions of the Psalms*. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century.* Translated by Maria Boulding. III, 15-20. New City Press, 2000.

Barry, William A. *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace*. Loyola Press, 2008.

———, *God and You: Prayer as a Personal Friendship*. Paulist Press, 1987.

———, *Praying the Truth: Deepening Your Friendship With God Through Honest Prayer.* LOYOLA PRESS, 2012.

Bloom, Anthony. *Beginning to Pray.* Paulist Press, 1970.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible.* Translated by Das Gebetbuch der Bibel. Augsburg Fortress, 1970.

Boulding, Maria. *Prayer: Our Journey Home.* Servant Books, 1979.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Great Prayers of the Old Testament.* Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

———, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.

Bunge, Gabriel. *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007.

Burrows, Ruth. *Essence of Prayer.* HiddenSpring, 2006.

Cameron, Michael. "Enerrationes in Psalmos." *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999.

———, "Totus Christus and the Psychagogy of Augustine's Sermons." *Augustinian Studies* 36, 2005, pp. 59-70.

Casey, Michael. *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer.* Triumph Books, 1996.

Chisholm, R. B., Jr. "Does God 'Change His Mind?'" *Bibliotheca sacra* 152(608), pp.387-399, 1995.

Craddock, Fred. Luke: *INTERPRETATION: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. John Knox Press, 1990.

Dalla Colletta, P. R., Tatton-Ramos, T. P. and Alminhana, L. O. "*Research on Intercessory Prayer: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations.*" *J Relig Health* 56, pp. 1930–1936, 2017.

DeCrane, Susanne M. "Ask for Anything: A Retrieval of a Theology of Petitionary Prayer." *Teach us to Pray* (PROCEEDINGS OF THE THEOLOGY INSTITUTE OF VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY). Francis A. Eigo, Editor. The Villanova University Press. 1996.

Di Muzio Gianluca. "Changing God's Mind." *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und* Religionsphilosophie 61(2), pp. 241-255, 2019.

Dyckman, Katherine Marie and Carroll, Patrick L. *Inviting the Mystic Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction.* Paulist Press, 1981.

Epperly, Bruce G. "Who Prays? A Process-Relational Reflection on Petitionary Prayer." *Encounter* 69.4, 2008, pp. 15-24.

Foster, Richard J. *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices From the Six Great Traditions of the Christian Faith.* HarperCollins, 1998.

Greenberg, Pamela. *The Complete Psalms: The Book of Prayer Songs in a New Translation*. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Gushee, David P. *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.

Hand, Thomas A. *Augustine On Prayer*, Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1986.

Harrington, Daniel J. *Jesus and Prayer: What the New Testament Teaches Us.* Kindle, The Word Among Us Press, 2009.

Harrison Warren, Tish. *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep.* Kindle, InterVarsity Press, 2020

Hoffman, Joshua. "On Petitionary Prayer." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, Article 2, 1-1-1985, pp. 21-29.

Houston. James, M. cslewisinstitute.org/The_Prayer_Life_of_CS_Lewis_FullArticle. 2006.

Jeremias, Joachim. *The Prayers of Jesus.* SCM PRESS LTD, 1967.

Karris, Mark Gregory. *Divine Echoes: Reconciling Prayer With the Uncontrolling Love of God.* Kindle, Published by Quoir, 2018.

Kelley, Joseph T. "Prayer." *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, Blackwell Publishing, Ltd, 2011.

Kleinschmidt S. "The Experiential Problem for Petitionary Prayer." *Int J Philos Relig* 83, 2018, pp. 219–229.

Lamott, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2012.

Laytham, Brent D. "'But If . . . by the Spirit of God" Matthew's Lord's Prayer as Spirit Christology." *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2018, pp. 24-38.

Leech, Kenneth. *True Prayer.* Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980.

Lewis, C. S. *Christian Reflections.* Edited by Walter Hooper. Kindle, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967.

———, *How to Pray: Reflections and Essays*. Kindle, HarperCollins e-books, 2018.

———, *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue Between Man and God.* Harcourt, Inc., 1964.

Loder, Ted. *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers For The Battle*. Augsburg Books, 1981.

Lohfink, Gerhard. *Prayer Takes Us Home: The Theology and Practice of Christian Prayer.* Translated by Linda Maloney. Kindle, Liturgical Press, 2013.

Macartney, C. Edward. "The Word That Conquered God." *Classic Sermons on Prayer*. Compiled by Warren W. Wiersbe. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1987

Mbamalu, Abiola. "Jesus the Interceding High Priest: A Fresh Look at Hebrews 7:25." *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 71(1), 2015, pp. 1-6.

Motyer, J.A. *The prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1993.

McManus, Erwin. *Why Prayer Matters*. youtu.be/Mq558k0gDQ, 2021.

Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer.* Kindle, Image Books, 1971.

Montgomery, James. hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2009/05/09/quotprayer-is-the-soul039s-sincere-desirequot/, 2009.

Moser, David J. "Totus Christus: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology." *Pro Ecclesia: Ajournai of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* Vol. 29(1), 2020, pp. 3-30.

Mulholland, Jr., Robert, M. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Nieuwhof, Carey. careynieuwhof.com/christians-stop-saying-prayer-works/. 2021.

Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk.* RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 1996.

———, *Acedia & me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*. RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 2008.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life.* Doubleday, 1975.

———, *The Genesee Diary: Report From a Trappist Monastery.* DoubleDay, 1976.

Nouwen, Henri, J. M., et al. *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit.* HarperCollins e-books, 2010.

Oord, Thomas Jay. *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*. InterVarsity Press, 2015.

O'Brien, Kevin. *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life.* Loyola Press, 2011.

Oliver, Mary. *Thirst.* Beacon Press, 2006.

Pickup, Martin. “Answer to Our Prayers: The Unsolved But Solvable Problem of Petitionary Prayer.” FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY Vol. 35 No. 1, January 2018, pp. 84–104.

Rolheiser, Ronald. ronrolheiser.com/reading-the-signs-of-the-times-2/#.YXmBIS-B0ic, 2003.

Rahner, Karl. *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer.* Translated by Bruce W. Gillette. The Liturgical Press, 1997.

Rauser, Randal. “Can Scientists Test the Effectiveness of Prayer?” *The Royal Institute of Philosophy*, 2019 Think 53, Vol. 18, Autumn 2019, pp. 67-74.

Rohr, Richard. cac.org/therese-lisieux-part-1-2017-10-03/, 2017.

Shadowlands. Directed by Richard Attenborough, performance by Anthony Hopkins, Price Entertainment, 1993.

Schmidt, Joseph F. *Praying our Experiences.* The Word Among Us Press, 2008.

Smith, Nicholas D., and YIP, Andrew C. “*Partnership with God: a partial solution to the problem of petitionary prayer*.” *Religious Studies*, *46*(3), 2010, pp. 395–410.

Stepmom. Directed by Chris Columbus, performances by Susan Sarandon, Ed Harris and Julia Roberts, TriStar Pictures, 1998

Stump, E. “Petitionary Prayer.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, April 1979, pp. 81-91.

Tetlow, Elizabeth M. “The Biblical Experience of Prayer.” Teach us to Pray (PROCEEDINGS OF THE THEOLOGY INSTITUTE OF VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY). Francis A. Eigo, Editor. The Villanova University Press. 1996.

The Apostle. Directed and written by Robert Duvall, performances by Robert Duvall, Farrah Fawcett and June Carter Cash, Butcher's Run Films, 1997

The Holy Bible. *New Revised Standard Version*. biblegateway.com, 2021.

The Holy Bible. *The Passion Translation.* BroadStreet Publishing Group, 2017.

The Jerusalem Bible. *Reader's Edition*. DOUBLEDAY, 1966.

Tillich, Paul. *The New Being.* Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

Wicks, Robert J., General Editor. *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition: A Handbook of Practical Approaches.* Franciscan Media, 2016.

Williams, R. "Augustine and the Psalms." *Interpretation* 58 no1 January 2004, pp. 18-27.

Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Wright, N. T., *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense.* HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

———, *Paul for Everyone, The Prison Letters*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Yancey, Philip. *Disappointment with God: Three questions no one asks aloud*. Zondervan Books, 1988.

———, *The Question That Never Goes Away: Why?* Kindle, Creative Trust Digital, 2013.

Zaleski, Philip and Zaleski, Carol. *PRAYER: A History.* Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

Other Websites:

dictionary.com/browse/transactional

imdb.com/title/tt0120686/

ncregister.com/blog/just-how-many-protestant-denominations-are-there