

Praying Scripture

for a

C H A N G E



An Introduction to
Lectio Divina

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for a
CHANGE

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Introduction

The Problem of Prayer

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 crossword puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us. And we know that we are not alone in this.

– C.S. Lewis

Yes, indeed. We are not alone in finding prayer difficult. I have often found it irksome, too. More times than I would like to admit I have looked at prayer as a burden, something to be checked off my “to do” list, like washing the dishes or flossing my teeth; something that I know I should do daily but all too often regard as a duty.

The necessity of prayer is seared into the Christian conscience, and yet many of us live our lives short on prayer. We hear the Bible call us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). We hear stories of saints who seemed to talk with God as easily as placing a direct call, and we erroneously imagine that prayer was effortless for them, marked always with joy, consolation, voices, and visions. Against this backdrop we

grow discouraged, convincing ourselves that we must have been born missing some “mystic gene.”

The stark contrast between the saints who heard God speak and us who often hear only our rosaries clacking against the pew was brought home to me in a rather surprising way one night as I was tucking my son, Joseph, into bed. After bedtime prayers, he burst into tears, crying “God doesn’t talk to me.” A spiritual crisis at age four! He was upset because God didn’t talk to him the way He talked to Jonah or St. Francis. No visions or voices! He thought something was wrong with him.

A lot of people feel like Joseph. While they might not expect visions or voices, they find prayer dry, confusing, frustrating, or just plain hard. Prayer is one of the fundamental marks of the spiritual life, as basic to Christian life as baseball and apple pie is to American identity. But when we look at our own feeble efforts at prayer we wonder how in the world we can listen to God, much less know and do His will.

What’s the Matter with Us?

If you have trouble praying, then welcome to the human race. The fact is, we don’t know *how* to pray. Everybody, including the saints, begins life not knowing how to pray. Don’t take my word for it. Read what the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:26, “We do not know how to pray as we ought.”

The problem is not that we are exceptionally bad at prayer compared to other people. The problem is that we are normal—which is to say, we are afflicted with the results of original sin. Our first parents enjoyed unbroken communion with God (shown in the

book of Genesis by the image of God “walking in the garden” with Adam and Eve, speaking with them freely and they with Him). With original sin, however, everything changed. The imagery of Genesis is vivid and profound. God doesn’t hide from us; in fact, He comes looking for us. But we hide from God (see Gn 3:8), our sin and shame opening a gulf between God and man and shattering the communion of “the beginning.” More than that, sin brought pain, backbreaking work, fruitless longing, domination, strife, and death into the world, breaking not only our relationship with God and but also with each other (Gn 3:16-19). Sin results in a darkened mind, a weakened will, and disordered desires (i.e., concupiscence). And as these maladies play out over time, we lose sight of God altogether.

Bridging the chasm between Creator and creature is no simple matter. God Himself observes the distance between us, saying, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). Given how difficult it is to have a deep, constant and committed relationship with another person, we should not be surprised that it is not easy to attempt a relationship with God, who is “wholly other.” The very idea of bridging the gap between God and humanity seems beyond improbable, so much so that the ancient Greek philosophers concluded that God and humanity could not be friends, because they were so unlike.

A Bridge over Troubled Waters

Have you ever met someone with whom you share nothing in common? It makes conversation rather difficult, if not downright

impossible. When you meet someone for the first time, there is always that initial awkwardness in a first conversation. Once you move beyond small talk about the weather and geographical origins you either find some common ground, some shared interest that becomes the subject of conversation, or the conversation runs out of steam.

Recently, I met someone for a business luncheon. During our introductory small talk we discovered that we shared something in common, something deeply important to both of us: we each have an only child who is adopted. As we shared our adoption stories we found them strikingly similar and had a very lively conversation. This conversation created a connection that sowed the seeds for an ongoing friendship. If our conversation had consisted only of small talk, it would have been like a fire fed only with small twigs and kindling, which doesn't have the intensity to last very long.

This highlights one of the difficulties of prayer. If deep conversation begins with sharing something in common, what could we sinful human beings have in common with the Creator of the universe? What makes us think we could sit down and have a conversation with God that could lead to friendship?

This seemingly insurmountable problem, however, was overcome when "the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). God became man, calling us His "friends" (Jn 15:14). In the Incarnation, when the Second Person of the Trinity took on human nature, something utterly astonishing and unexpected happened. The gap between creature and Creator was bridged, with Jesus taking a form that is "lower than the angels" (Heb 2:9) in order that He might call us "brethren" (Heb 2:11). Thus, as the author of Hebrews joyfully declares:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

We share more in common with God than the greatest philosophers could ever have imagined. Jesus took on our nature to bridge the gap caused by sin and to restore the communion lost by original sin. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* so eloquently puts it, "Man may forget his Creator or hide far from His face ... yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer" (CCC 2567). And as we shall see, in the person of Jesus, God not only calls us but brings us into friendship with Him and teaches us how to pray.

Christ Our Teacher

Like St. Paul (and us), the twelve apostles were aware that they didn't know how to pray. This is why they went to Jesus and asked "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1-4). Notice that Jesus did not scold them for not knowing how to pray, tell them prayer was a snap, advise them to just go with the flow, or tell them that whatever popped into their heads was the voice of God. Sympathetic to human weakness, Jesus taught them how to pray, both by His example and His teaching.

In the Old Testament, God revealed His pedagogy on prayer when He created for Israel two great sanctuaries in which to encounter Him: the Sabbath and the Temple. The Sabbath was the sanctuary

in time. From the moment of creation, God called His people to set aside their temporal concerns and labors, and enter into the rest and refreshment of worship. The Sabbath, the twenty-four-hour period from sundown to sundown at the end of each week, was “made for man,” as Jesus says in Mark 2:27; made so that man and woman might not forget that their ultimate happiness would not be found in the fruit of the field, but in relationship with God, which is the fruit of worship and prayer.

Whereas the Sabbath was God’s sanctuary in time, the Temple was His sanctuary in space. Within the Temple dwelt the very presence of God. It was to the Temple that God’s people came to offer sacrifice and receive the Lord’s mercy. In the Tent of Meeting, the predecessor to the Temple, Moses talked to the LORD “face to face” (Ex 33:11). Until God Himself would come and walk on the earth, the Temple was the singular place of intimate encounter with God. These two sanctuaries were a continual reminder and invitation to God’s people to set apart space and time for union with the Lord.

In the gospels, Jesus modeled this practice of setting aside a sanctuary in time and space for the Father. The gospels are full of moments where we observe Jesus engaged in the relationship we call prayer. He prays at pivotal moments such as His baptism (Lk 3:21) and the selection of the twelve apostles (Lk 6:12-16). We find Him at prayer in the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration (Lk 9:28-29) and the darkness of Gethsemane and Calvary (Mt 26:36-39; Lk 23:34, 46). He prays in public, at the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16) and at the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 2:45-49), and in private. Mark tells us that Jesus got up early in the morning and sought out lonely places to pray (Mk 1:35). Matthew and Luke recount that Jesus prayed into

the evening and through the night and sought out places to be with His Father in heaven (see Mt 14:23, Lk 6:12-13). The apostles acquired this habit, and so we read that “all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14) and that “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (Acts 3:1; see also Lk 24:53).

Jesus’ habit of prayer, His preaching, and His answer to the apostles’ request, all emphasize the truth that *God teaches us to pray*. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, our response to the Teacher should be to “approach the Lord Jesus as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray” (CCC 2598).

Indeed, the crucial thing for us to understand is that God is eager to teach us how to pray. So eager, in fact, that His Spirit is already at work in us creating the “divine discontent” we so often feel about our prayer lives. God does not judge our attempts at prayer any more than a natural father would chide an infant taking his first steps. Rather, He cheers us on, motivates us to try again, and encourages us to seek out and question those wiser and more experienced (see Prv 11:14), to search more deeply, to explore the “wisdom of the ages” in our restless quest.

Prayer and the School of the Holy Spirit

Here, we discover a vital hidden-in-plain-sight secret of the Christian life: *The reason anyone anywhere at any time has ever been moved to pray is because God, by His Spirit, was drawing them toward him*. Jesus says as much when He tells His disciples that “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44). Every

prayer to God that has ever been uttered was uttered at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

The very desire that inspired the apostles to say, “Teach us to pray” came from God. God desires our dialogue of prayer with Him more than we do. As the *Catechism* observes, “Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (CCC 2560). That may be hard to believe, since we often feel that our prayer consists primarily of us banging away at the gates of heaven and crying “How long, O Lord.” But St. Paul describes in his letter to the Romans how intimately God is involved in our prayer:

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

In short, God doesn’t just teach us how to pray; His Spirit empowers us to pray. He enables us on earth to do what God the Son does eternally: offer the Father praise and thanksgiving for the gift of the Father’s love in the Spirit. What we need to realize is that we are never left on our own when it comes to prayer.

This is precisely Paul’s point in highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15-16). Paul knew from experience that Jesus gives us far more than a method of prayer; He gives us the means to pray through His Spirit.

We must always keep in mind that prayer is God’s invitation to

enter into an intimate relationship of love and life with Him. If we forget that this is what is happening when we pray, we start treating prayer as simply an obligation, as a hoop that must be jumped through in order to avoid offending God and provoking His displeasure. We should never see prayer as a means of bribing, manipulating, or placating a capricious god. Such a view is not only false but ultimately enslaving.

God doesn’t want us to be slaves, but free sons and daughters. And so He gives us the liberating Spirit of His Son and showers us with gifts through His Holy Church. Indeed, the *Catechism* defines prayer as a familial relationship: “Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ” (CCC 2564). God desires a personal relationship with us through our Lord Jesus, who has paid with His blood to open the door for us to enter into that relationship. And that’s the good news: the God who calls us to relationship, and who has suffered and died to bridge the chasm between man and God, will surely provide the means for us to enter into this intimate relationship of prayer. The God who has put in your heart the desire to know Him intimately will fulfill that desire.

In the course of this book, we will discover the secret of the saints, an approach to prayer which can enable us to begin the adventure of a life-giving dialogue with God.