

REDISCOVERING
NEW TESTAMENT PRAYER

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PRAYER

BOLDNESS AND BLESSING IN THE NAME OF JESUS

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*To the seminary communities in which
I have been privileged to teach,
especially Princeton, Union, and General.
May our study be guided by praise and thanksgiving.*

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Preface

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, the surgery turned out to be quite routine. I was on the table for only forty minutes, blissfully detached from the scene by a mild solution of Valium dripping into my veins. The hospital had classified me as an ambulatory patient, and so I was. Barely two hours after the operation, with Elisabeth grasping my arm to keep me steady, I eased into a cab on Third Avenue for the short trip home to lower Manhattan.

The lump on my tongue had developed suddenly, toward the end of a much-needed sabbatical leave in Los Angeles. It was too large to ignore and showed no signs of diminishing. How odd that it should appear at just about the time the first draft of this book was completed. I was praying then with some regularity, mostly to give thanks for a special time of refreshment, and for the end of a long project. In hours the whole landscape of my inner life was transformed.

From a medical point of view my recovery proceeded normally. But I was filled with distress as I waited for the results of the biopsy. Strange mixtures of high anxiety and stoic resignation became the order of the day. Only by offering all of them up to God did I find something like peace. Two weeks after the surgery I learned, to my huge relief, that the tumor was benign. I was lucky, as they say, although for me the word *spared* rings truer. This time, it seems, I escaped from a major showdown with death. I know much younger people who have not been granted such a reprieve, and in fact I continue to work through a kind of survivor's guilt about my healing.

All over the country family and friends were praying with me that the lump would prove not to be cancerous; but I shall never know, in this life, exactly what role their requests played in God's providence. What I do know is that early on in the long process of diagnosis and treatment a few words from the psalmist became startlingly real: "[God] shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Ps. 91:11-12, Book of Common Prayer). Well, of

course I did dash my foot in the sense of incurring a physical ailment, but not in the more important sense of tripping over that stone of offense and falling into a pit of despair. I knew I was being buoyed up by a strength that far exceeded my own.

And now I have returned to gratitude, especially for the simple pleasures of eating normally and speaking clearly. Scripture contains a host of warnings against the misuse of the tongue. Mostly they serve to accent its proper vocation, which is the articulation of God's praise (Ps. 35:28; 50:19–23; 71:23–24; 126:1–3; Lk. 1:64; Acts 2:4, 11; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:11). Indeed, praise and thanksgiving form the very soul of New Testament prayer. It makes sense to me that now I can honestly say I enjoy singing hymns to God. Perhaps that is the lesson I needed to learn before sending this book on its way. Perhaps it will be a lesson to relearn and teach for the rest of my life.

The music of thanksgiving continues to swell as I reflect on how the present study came into being. I began my research with considerable reluctance. I had to be persuaded over a period of years by editor Roland Seboldt and others that such a book was needed and that I might be the right person to attempt it. Now I want to express my thanks for their persistence. Even before I began writing in earnest, several people came forward to announce that they were praying for the project. Exactly what this means, or will mean, I cannot say. No one would believe me if I reported that the writing went altogether smoothly. (It didn't.) But I can say that I was not consumed by it, as I sometimes have been by previous assignments. Instead, I felt mostly enriched, and sometimes even led.

Special words of gratitude must be directed to a number of people and groups without whose support there would be no book: to Professor Elisabeth Koenig, my wife, for depths of sharing that cannot be put into words; to the Reverends Valarie Whitcomb and Carol Anderson, along with their congregations, for mighty intercession and good humor; to the history department at UCLA for granting me the status of visiting scholar in the fall of 1990; to Professor Scott Bartchy of that department and his spouse Nancy Breuer for many words and acts of welcome; to Nancy and Linc Field for probing conversations over many sumptuous meals; to Melissa and Michael Hentges for constancy in their caring; to the Board for Theological Education of the Episcopal Church for a generous sabbatical grant, awarded through the Conant Fund; to Dr. Mary Tanner, Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches, Chaplain Emeritus

F. W. Dillistone of Oriel College, Oxford, and Dean Charles Elliott of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, for their ongoing words of encouragement. Alice Madden, faculty secretary at the General Theological Seminary, deserves much praise for preparing several "final" copies of this manuscript. I also want to pay tribute to my editors at HarperSan-Francisco, Roland Seboldt and Ronald Klug. Throughout this project our relationship has been far more than business as usual. Both at the beginning and the end they guided me into better forms of expression than I myself could have imagined. In the final stages of the book's production, editors Hilary Vartanian, Holly Elliott, Caroline Pincus, and Terri Goff also provided indispensable help of the highest quality. Senior seminarian Rebecca Brown produced the biblical index with grace as well as efficiency.

And what shall I say to God? Some words by an obscure librettist come to mind, perhaps because I heard them sung in concert just a few days before my surgery. They live on in the collective memory of Western culture through the great music that was composed for them by Bach. But they also have a value of their own, and in many ways they tell the central story of New Testament prayer.

Lord of the heavens, give ear to our stamm'ring,
Scarcely our faint alleluias can praise you
When by your angels with psalms you are lauded.
Yet hear the hearts that rejoice in your glory;
We would to you our devotion be singing
In whom alone our salvation can stand.¹

Communion with God at the Turn of the Ages

DO WE NEED YET ANOTHER BOOK ON PRAYER? One could make a good case for answering "no." In recent years the great devotional classics of both the Eastern and Western traditions have become available to the reading public on an unprecedented scale.¹ Many contemporary works are also of excellent quality. The popularity of retreat centers for prayer and meditation continues at a high level, and there is no shortage of people ready to offer their services as spiritual guides. In addition, the various twelve-step programs emerging from our national anguish over addictive behaviors have helped tens of thousands find their way to a lively relationship with a Higher Power. A whole new body of writing on spirituality has developed from such programs and from other groups and movements that are best identified by the term *New Age*.

Yet there is a difficulty with this recent upsurge in devotional practice and literature, for much of it seems to reflect and foster a diffuse kind of religion in general, only marginally related to the biblical forms of faith.² While I empathize with people who find the worship life of their local churches and synagogues to be less than inspiring, I cannot quite believe that the present growth of non-institutional or para-institutional religion signals a real deepening in

our communion with God. I mean that religion without a solid base often falls prey to peculiar romanticisms, which in turn lead to the very opposite of spiritual truth and freedom. Moreover, religion in general, as I perceive it, frequently lives in deprivation. Always standing just outside the houses of the ancient traditions, it does not get properly nourished at any one of their tables. Religion in general often searches for esoteric experiences but turns away from daily sustenance.³ Such a tendency, I believe, nearly always proves to be self-defeating. And it is far from necessary.

One simple truth about the spiritual life just now coming into focus for me as a result of work on this book is that careful reflection on the fundamentals of our prayer tradition—which means, for Christians, the New Testament—pushes us very quickly beyond conventional distinctions between the esoteric and the ordinary. Or, to put it a little differently, even the most rudimentary practice of what the earliest believers meant by prayer turns out to include what we now think of as extraordinary encounters with the Holy.

But here is another paradox. Most of us Christians today are not well schooled in the basics of New Testament faith, and even those of us who devote long years to learning or teaching them often fail to connect with them at the level of our prayer life. I admire the candor of Loren Halvorsen, who recently wrote: “Though I have taught for many years at a theological seminary, I am very much in need of instruction in prayer. I am not alone.”⁴ I know exactly what he means. As a doctor of theology, I must admit to being just a novice at prayer; and I have even taught a course on the subject for men and women seeking ordination!

I am not much comforted by the knowledge that many of my parish-based colleagues also suffer from difficulties with personal prayer. The Reverend Donna Schaper observes that pastoral leadership often “has to do with turning our bodies, minds, and souls into an instrument through which others may turn to God.”⁵ But in Schaper’s experience, which may well be typical, this necessary public stewardship all too frequently becomes a false substitute for the minister’s personal communion with God. Here many of us who are clergy will feel called upon to make embarrassing confessions. Yet our honesty can also be a way toward health. To speak of our deficiencies before God is a prayer of repentance; and Jesus promises that whenever we attempt it, “there is joy before the angels of God” (Lk. 15:10), which means in God’s own heart.

I suspect that a good number of laypeople who read these lines may be feeling a similar blend of honesty and penitence about their prayer lives. I hope they will find this study speaking as much to their condition as to that of their clerical sisters and brothers. More and more, I am convinced, biblical specialists need to be writing for the general public of the churches, and for those on the ecclesiastical boundaries. It may well be that we should discern in the current popular fascination with religion a genuine desire on the part of many for a more disciplined, life-transforming communion with God. If so, Christians of all types and self-definitions will find no better guide toward the fulfillment of that desire than the New Testament.

But laypeople and clergy alike may harbor certain doubts about the value of a text-centered approach to prayer like the one presented here. In leading Bible classes on this topic, I encounter occasional skepticism about whether research into the basic documents of our faith can help very much when it comes to something as nonrational as prayer. The point is well taken, but it loses force if we begin to conceive of textual study as something more than an intellectual enterprise. For me, true literary investigation always involves listening for the reasons of the heart that have produced a given passage. Why, I want to find out, would anyone say, "I pray that you may . . . know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18–19)? What sort of relationship with the Divine has prompted these words? What I think I have discovered is that when Jesus and the New Testament authors offer their teachings on prayer or allow us to overhear their prayers, they wish not only to instruct our minds but also to renew our spirits and change our behaviors. Behind and within the biblical text is the real prayer experience of the One we name as Christ and of his first followers. It reaches out to us, inviting us to share in its richness.

Here a small item from the annals of publishing should also be noted. As far as I can tell, the last treatment of our topic produced by a biblical specialist for the English-speaking public appeared in 1967. It is a fine volume called *The Prayers of the New Testament* by Donald Coggan, later Archbishop of Canterbury from 1974 to 1980.⁶ The present study in no way attempts to replace Lord Coggan's, but it does try to take advantage of whatever progress New Testament scholars have made over the intervening years. And I think we can in fact point to a few breakthroughs.

The Holy One Seeks Our Company

"This afternoon, while you were in class, a dragonfly sailed through the window of your study and circled around the room for a while. It seemed quite friendly." Dragonflies are uncommon in lower Manhattan, but that was not the real reason Elisabeth's announcement over dinner hit me like a snowball in the face. As noted above, I had some years ago taught a seminary-level course on the practice of prayer in the New Testament. One of the assigned readings came from a remarkable little book by H. A. Nielsen called *The Bible—As If for the First Time*.⁷ In it Nielsen retells an incident, barely noticed by most of us, from the first chapter of John's Gospel. It concerns the call of Nathanael, who had initially countered his friend Philip's enthusiasm over Jesus with the cynical quip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (1:46). Eventually Nathanael was persuaded to "come and see," but before he could even form an opinion about this strange prophet, Jesus reached out to him with a greeting: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile" (1:47). Nathanael was startled. Did Philip tell Jesus about his cynicism? Perhaps, but Jesus did not actually accuse him of that vice. His words might be an ironic compliment—or a joke. Nathanael responded, warily: "How do you know me?" And Jesus answered: "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you" (1:48). *Before* Philip called you? But how, Nathanael must have thought, could he be watching me then? And how could he have gotten to know me in that private moment? The text itself does not spell out these reflections but instead tells us that at this point Nathanael just broke down and blurted out one of the loftier christological confessions in John's Gospel: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (1:49).

What is going on here? Nielsen thinks that Nathanael was doing something unusual under the fig tree: "solitary prayer perhaps, but something that tied in with a temptation to deceive." In any case, "humanly speaking, Jesus *could* not have seen him under the fig tree, a haunt chosen by one who took pains to be alone."⁸ Nielsen helps us enter this mysterious story by means of a modern one. He asks us to imagine ourselves alone, rowing out onto a quiet pond we know in order to struggle through a problem of conscience, a temptation perhaps, to misrepresent ourselves so that we can stand first in line for an attractive new job.

Out in the middle of the pond you are isolated. Everything is so still that a dragonfly finds rest on the blade of your shipped oar. Only your thoughts are busy for that quarter of an hour. Finally you think: "What if I don't land that job? It won't be the end of the world."

On the way back to the house you meet a bright-eyed stranger and trade greetings. He knows your name, surprising but not impossible, and tells you his. Then out of the blue he says, "I appreciate someone who can't tolerate lies." . . . How could he know? "Have I met you somewhere?" you manage to ask. "Not exactly," he replies, "but I was watching you through the dragonfly's eye."⁹

Perhaps the reader will already have guessed that Elisabeth had no inkling of this story or of my fascination with it when I first read it years ago. (I notice now that most of it is underlined in my copy of Nielsen's book.)

Prayer is like this. God visits us and knows us in our most private places and then seeks us out for a conscious encounter with the true Source of our being. It has been happening ever since creation. The Lord God, "walking in the garden in the cool of the day," was not looking for Adam and Eve's sin but for them, for their company (Gen. 3:8-9). Marjorie Thompson writes: "Some of us remember the first article of Westminster Catechism, which asks: 'What is the chief end of Man?', to which the resounding response is: 'The chief end of Man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever!' I am firmly convinced that God delights in our companionship. . . . I am equally convinced that God yearns for us to delight in the Divine Presence, to love God for who God is, not merely for what God can give us or make of us."¹⁰ When the psalmist lifted up his voice in prayer to God, it was because he had first heard a voice within: "'Come, my heart says, seek his face'" (Ps. 27:8, NRSV). The New Testament confirms this in words of Jesus that seem to convey both promise and command at the same time: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk. 12:30). "The hour is coming and now is here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him" (Jn. 4:23, NRSV).

True worship means approaching the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) to acknowledge God's primacy and transcendent otherness. At the

same time, however, it also includes making ever-new discoveries of God's loving presence with and in us. I chose the word *company* for this section of the first chapter because it seemed appropriate to describe the New Testament's way of telling us what God wants from us and for us. Only then did I think to check out the several meanings of this word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here is the substance of what I found.

"Company" comes from the old French word *compagnie*, which literally means "an eating of bread together," an everyday relationship in which ordinary things are intimately shared. In Chaucer the word sometimes denotes a sexual connection, and this is consistent with the Hebrew verb for knowing, which can also refer to physical intercourse. More often, however, the desire for someone's company implies a guest-host relationship that is characterized by a wide range of social interaction. A company can also be a group of people assembled for some common purpose. We may think of a band of actors or a medieval trade guild. In the United States our first image of company is likely to be a corporation established for the purpose of economic gain. Finally, a company can mean a formation of soldiers or a ship's crew, that is, a group of individuals efficiently deployed for battle.

If I have understood the New Testament correctly, virtually all of these meanings are present, at least by implication, in the communing with God that we call prayer. The larger company that God wants to keep with us through prayer is the church. Here society and economics are being revalued, first of all in the depths of the human heart. In addition, the church is a school where we are trained and set in formation for quasi-military encounters with the principalities and powers of this age. And these clashes, as we shall see, are experienced chiefly through prayer.

But what about God's knowing of us? The New Testament is restrained in its use of overtly sexual language to describe this dimension of prayer.¹¹ On the other hand, it does speak graphically of God's intimate and exclusive claim upon the whole of our selves in ways that suggest the erotic. Here are some relevant texts from Paul's letters:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united with a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The

two shall become one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him [1 Cor. 6:15–17]. Anyone who loves God is known by him [1 Cor. 8:3]. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known [1 Cor. 13:13]. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? [Gal. 4:8–9]

It seems clear that in all the texts cited a close prayer relationship with God or Christ is taken for granted as the mode of our knowing and being known (see Gal. 4:6). Moreover, Paul assumes a certain degree of consciousness on the part of his readers regarding God's intimacy with them.¹² For most believers, however, this consciousness needs to grow. In all his letters the apostle's goal is to promote an "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35).

We may conclude, then, that a large part of New Testament prayer has to do with a dawning awareness of God's loving closeness in Christ (Eph. 3:14–21) and with our response to this in a variety of forms (e.g., praise, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, confession, self-offering). Then faith begins to work through love toward others as a natural expression of our communion with God (Gal. 5:6, 16–20).¹³ An old collect (short liturgical prayer) sums it up nicely: "Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that amid the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found." This joy comes not from commands and promises as such but from knowing the God who draws near to reveal them. If the New Testament is correct, the Holy One seeks our company, indeed, makes us into a company worthy of the Holy (Eph. 2:13–22). And so we discover what it means to worship in spirit and truth.

In the Rush of a New World Coming

According to the New Testament, God's persistent search for our companionship now takes place within a context of unique urgency. We see this early on in the Gospel tradition when Mark describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as follows: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near;

repent and believe in the gospel" (1:14). The claim being made here is that with Jesus' advent a decisive shift in the cosmic order has occurred. Jesus and the apostolic writers use a variety of language to interpret this novelty. The nearness of God's kingdom, which refers, among other things, to a special form of God's ruling presence, becomes the hallmark of Jesus' preaching and teaching in parables. But he also refers to the "new wine" of his ministry (Mk. 2:22), insisting that it can only be contained by new wineskins (concepts? communities?). Jesus' first followers continued to use kingdom language to express their experience of God's nearness. But in the light of their Lord's death and resurrection they felt compelled to supplement it with other images, such as "new creation," "the present moment," "the day of salvation," "the ends of the ages," "the fullness of time," and "the judgment of this world."¹⁴ Most of these phrases were drawn from the apocalyptic traditions of Judaism, where it was expected that God would someday bring an end to the world order as we know it in order to reestablish the peace and righteousness of Eden.

There was no rigid uniformity among the early believers about exactly when this would happen (Mk. 13:32), or about the extent to which it was already beginning to transpire. Paul seemed to think that the end of all things was imminent and could occur within his own lifetime, although he also placed great stress on the presence of the Holy Spirit as a generous "first installment" of what was soon to be completed (2 Cor. 1:22, NRSV). The author of the Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, shows almost no interest in speculating about the date of the world's final transformation, since he was convinced that believers even now enjoy full access to eternal life in communion with the risen Jesus (6:41–59).

Yet on one point all the New Testament authors—and Jesus—agree: with the coming near of God's kingdom in the early decades of what we now call the first century, something unique was happening to the world order. An extraordinary infusion of God's goodness had occurred, and this was bringing about a new kind of warfare against evil—not only in the human heart but also in "the heavenly places," where it was thought to operate through superhuman principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12).

I use the word *rush* to describe a distinctive feature of what the New Testament means by life at the turn of the ages. A rush is a forward movement characterized by an unusual force or eagerness that sometimes approaches the violent. We find this usage in Luke's

account of the first Spirit-led prayer of the church: "When the day of Pentecost had come, [the followers of Jesus] were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where we were sitting. . . . And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4). Luke goes on to explain how the words of these earliest disciples issued in a combination of praise and prophecy. That is, the tongues were addressed directly to God as a type of adoration (see Acts 10:46). But they were also intelligible languages, announcing to onlookers that God's mighty acts of the past were now happening once again, this time in their final form (Acts 2:11, 17-21).

Throughout the New Testament we have the sense that prayer is an urgent matter because it grows out of God's decisive acts at the end of conventional time. Prayer is never casual, for it takes place in the midst of a great cosmic flux. What we do or do not do in our communion with God *now* matters in some very real way for the life of the world. What we do or do not do, along with our praying neighbors, can tip a secret balance in the course of history.

It may be hard for us contemporary believers to enter into the rush of expectation that pervaded virtually all the prayers of the New Testament. But I think we can at least open ourselves to its viability and allow God's Spirit to educate us in its nuances. Today we need not include within our articles of faith a confession that the world will come to an end in our lifetime (though that could happen through an ecological disaster). What does seem essential for Christians to affirm is that we are living at the juncture of the ages, when both good and evil are coming to their ultimate expression. This interim period has obviously lasted for two thousand years and may last for many thousands more. The key issue is not time as we reckon it in weeks and months but time as it intersects with eternity.

Does this happen in a new way—and continue to happen—through the person of Jesus? That is what the church has always confessed; and if it is so, our prayers will be shaped accordingly. Here, perhaps, we can understand Evelyn Underhill's definition of Christian prayer as "the substance of eternal life."¹⁵ She does not mean, I think, that we who pray will become timeless or lose interest in the affairs of the present but rather that we will be joined together with the Incarnation, which is God's way of granting the earth its greatest possible reality. The cosmic fullness of time experienced by the

earliest believers was inherently linked by them with what they came to call the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). And this event, they felt, was being replicated among them again and again through prayer: "Because you are [God's] children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4:6; see also Jn. 1:12).

Kyrios Iesous

The Greek words above are thought by many scholars to be the earliest of all Christian confessions (see 1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9), although they were probably first uttered in Aramaic as *Mar Jehoshua*.¹⁶ Paul says that only the Holy Spirit can move people to make such a confession from the heart. But what does it mean? To call Jesus "Lord" is to name him as the one whom God has raised from the dead and given divine authority to rule over the turn of the ages (Rom. 1:1–6; 1 Cor. 15:20–28). This naming also becomes a cry of emancipation, because the advent of God's governance through Jesus spells the defeat of every oppressive power. Indeed, the reigning of God's Son is the very opposite of oppression, because he consistently and decisively overcomes evil with good, not with retaliation. To name Jesus as Lord means to praise God for all the blessings of the new creation and at the same time to defy every other force that claims control over human destiny. With just two words we articulate God's will that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil. 2:10).

Kyrios Iesous. Perhaps these words (or their Aramaic equivalent) were even spoken by the stunned disciples at the first resurrection appearances. In any case, believers used them not long afterward in responding to visions of the Risen One (Acts 7:59; 9:5); and the apostle Paul refers to his call as a seeing of "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1). This evidence suggests that almost from the beginning the expression "Lord Jesus" constituted a prayer. In fact we find such a prayer at the very end of John's Apocalypse in the weighty little sentence "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20; see further Mt. 7:21–23; 1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8, where the words are implied). It may well be that Jesus' name was also spoken as an act of devotion during prayers to God, for he was often felt to be present alongside petitioners (Mt. 18:18–20) or in heaven at God's right hand, interceding on their behalf as they themselves approached the throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16; 7:24; 8:1).