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PRAYING

*Finding Our Way
Through Duty
to Delight*



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THE GOD WE PRAY TO

*Now Jesus was praying, . . .
and when he finished,
one of his disciples said to him,
“Lord, teach us to pray.” . . .
And he said to them,
“When you pray, say: Father, . . .”*

LUKE 11:1-2

*Lord, teach us how to pray aright,
With reverence and with fear;
Though dust and ashes in thy sight,
We may, we must draw near.
We perish if we cease from prayer;
O, grant us power to pray!
And when we meet thee we prepare,
Lord, meet us by the way.*

JAMES MONTGOMERY
(1771-1854)

At the opening of this book, we invite our readers to pause a moment to ask yourselves honestly how you got on in prayer this week or first thing this morning. Our guess is that most of our readers are like us;

we want to get things right, but we are more than a little embarrassed to admit how far-reaching are the problems we have in praying. That being the case, the point from which we start is the universal Christian certainty, expressed by James Montgomery in the above lines penned two centuries ago: “we may, we must draw near. / We perish if we cease from prayer.” We all *need* to pray, and we know it. We all are *told* to pray, and we do not argue against doing so. In our hearts we all *want* to pray, for we find in ourselves what we can only call an *instinct* to go to God for help and protection and comfort and encouragement, much as young children go to their parents for these things. Nor do any of us doubt that we are impoverished in all sorts of ways when we *don’t* pray. So we keep on trying to pray, and we constantly look around for resources that will help us to pray better. Old Christians and young Christians, American Christians and African Christians, rich Christians and poor Christians, Christian intellectuals and Christian farm workers, healthy Christians and sick and disabled Christians, everywhere and at all times, we are all at one here. It was this solidarity of felt need here that became the trigger and launch pad for this book on praying—and on praying better.

THE VENTURE OF PRAYING

Patterns of personal prayer vary widely. Some of us use set forms. We borrow prayers from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer or draw on a wide range of devotional manuals. We use prayers that were composed by Celtic saints eons ago; we use prayers that come from the Middle Ages and prayers from Roman Catholics ancient and modern as well as prayers from Protestant sources. We make up our own prayers; we try to “formulate our souls,” as P. T. Forsyth put it, by writing prayers for ourselves as a regular discipline. And many of us try to get on without using set prayers at all, some of us following the ACTS sequence (Adoration-Confession-Thanksgiving-Supplication), others not. But how happy are we with what we do?

Most Christians pray differently during different life stages. As young

Christians, enthusiastic about our newfound faith, we burble before the Lord about our lives in the way in which young children burble to their parents about all the things they see going on around them. But later we become less certain that such burbling alone is the essence of prayer. As children growing in their relationship with their parents cannot happily revert to baby ways of communication, so we reach out for a more mature and reverent prayer style, and we become less and less happy about the way we actually pray. We feel we are trudging along in a marsh, getting muddy and messed-up while going nowhere. We make requests to God and then we wonder whether they made any difference. We ask ourselves, *Is God answering my prayers? If not, why not? If he is, how is he doing it, because what's happening isn't quite what I asked for? Did I ask wrongly then?* The winter of our discontent at our experience of prayer seems to go on forever.

There are, of course, many pundits available who say, "I can help you; I will teach you a technique that works." Then they tell us about such things as listening prayer, centering prayer, labyrinth prayer, prayer in tongues, the prayer of silence, mental prayer, the prayer of union and how to get through the dark night of the soul. These phrases all have meaning, and they do in fact encourage fresh effort in praying. People sit gratefully through talks on these various techniques of prayer, and experiment with them, but they are soon found casting around for further help because their prayer difficulties have not yet been solved. Changed technique, alone, is not the remedy for their problems. Let us be realistic about where we are and where we are not in this matter of praying. Deep down all of us have found that prayer isn't as easy as some people make it sound, or as easy as we ourselves had hoped it would be once our technique was straightened out.

THE DANGER OF ROUTINE

When our praying seems to have run amuck, we wisely return to prayer as a duty. And so we establish a routine whereby we regularly pray at set

times and in set ways—and this (like all the various techniques mentioned above) provides a measure of help. But here too we are wise to be wary. We must discern whether prayer has not become for us a mechanical routine we are able to carry out to our own satisfaction *just because* it is mechanical, something like the way we carry out the daily exercise of cleaning our teeth. We don't think about cleaning our teeth; we simply do it. If we routinize prayer in the same way, we don't have to think seriously about it at all, but we can go through the day with a nice warm feeling inside telling ourselves and God, "I've said my prayers; I've done it." Christians who routinize prayer as they attempt to make prayer a *genuine* exercise of communion with God are sometimes disappointed or perhaps encouraged, but for the wrong reasons.

Does routine work? For some, yes. For others their routine simply lines them up with the pagans of whom Jesus spoke, who thought they would be heard because of their many words (Mt 6:7). Routine prayer can actually come from a tired soul. It reduces prayer to an item to be ticked off in the checklist of things to do—preferably with as little mental and emotional engagement as possible. No one sets out to pray like that. But tired souls drop into the same semi-automatic mode of actions as tired bodies, and in that way prayer as a mechanical routine can become a mindless task that creates a sense of spiritual security that is false.

This pitfall is not to be equated, however, with having a specific time set aside for intentional communion with God. In that sense, our praying should be a regular routine, like eating meals. Good routine praying is not mechanical, a mere parroting of prayers, but is similar to the way that wise couples who live busy lives plan the time of day when they are going to talk about how the day has gone and just enjoy being together. Many who pray meaningfully have found it a wonderful help to schedule times with God and to plan in advance how they are going to use that time. It is like scheduling an afternoon where husband and wife will go for a walk together, where nobody will interfere, since there is a lot of stuff that they need to go over together and much they have to do for

refreshing their relationship to each other. There is endless benefit to be gained from a regularly scheduled appointment for your time alone with your Lord and from planning ahead some of the ground that you will cover when you and he are alone together.

Married couples who plan such times of togetherness thus avoid the widespread trap for busy couples of living alongside each other and never talking in depth because they simply don't have time. For them, what started as love becomes a teeth-cleaning kind of relationship. Not good! And a person who plans prayer times with eager forethought will think (and perhaps say), *I don't want to break my appointments with God, for he certainly won't break his with me. I want to grow in grace, and my daily prayer time is essential for that.* Exactly! Christians are covenant partners with God, who will faithfully keep his covenant with us at all times. So, on the basis of the mutual covenant commitment, our friendship with God should grow deeper through having regular times set apart for meeting him in prayer. That at least is the ideal. But pitfalls remain.

Routine prayer, as we can now see, always brings the danger that the routine itself will become the goal and, once fulfilled, will become a source of false well-being. Routine prayer cannot of itself remove our feeling of perplexity about prayer. Faithful observance of routine may diminish the intensity of that feeling, but if we are honest we have to recognize that the perplexity itself remains. We are not sure of ourselves in prayer. We have known times when we felt that God had come very close to us as we prayed, and times too when we have brought problems to God and events have happened that we have been able to recognize as answers to our prayers and therefore as encouragements to go on praying. But on a day-to-day basis we are all still struggling, and we all need help.

THE STRUGGLE OF PRAYING

It seems, then, that *struggle* is the realistic word to describe the typical Christian experience of praying, and we are encouraged to note that when evangelical pietist and theologian Donald Bloesch wrote on our

topic he titled his book *The Struggle of Prayer*.¹ We note too that in P. T. Forsyth's little book *The Soul of Prayer*, written almost a century ago, the reality of struggle is central.² Arguably, these are the men who have thought most seriously and written most deeply and weightily about prayer in our time. And certainly, the category of struggle will sound out as a kind of ground bass in our book.

John Charles Ryle, sometime Anglican bishop of Liverpool, England, wrote a tract that sold by the thousands under the title *Do You Pray?* (1852). It is now reprinted under the title *A Call to Prayer*.³ Some extracts from it will help us forward as we seek to square up to the struggle of praying. Ryle's rhetoric is a century and a half old, but his points could not be more timely for us today.

I ask . . . whether you pray, because *a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian*. All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is *praying*. This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God. "They cry day and night unto him" (Luke 18:7). The Holy Spirit, who makes them new creatures, works in them the feeling of adoption, and makes them cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). . . . It is as much a part of their new nature to pray as it is of a child to cry. They see their need of mercy and grace. They feel their emptiness and weakness. They cannot do otherwise than they do. They *must* pray.

I ask whether you pray because *there is no duty in religion so neglected*

¹Donald Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

²P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (1916; reprint, Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1995).

³J. C. Ryle, *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel, Ms.: Audubon Press, 1996). Portions quoted are from pages 10-19, 26-31, 33. The whole tract is well worth reading, and the substance of it is incorporated in the chapter on prayer in J. C. Ryle's *Practical Religion* (1878; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998).

as private prayer. . . . I believe there are tens of thousands whose prayers are nothing but a mere form, a set of words repeated by rote without a thought about their meaning. . . . Many, even of those who use good forms, mutter their prayers after they have got into bed, or while they wash or dress in the morning. Men may think what they please, but they may depend upon it that in the sight of God *this is not praying*. Words said without heart are as utterly useless to our souls as the drumbeating of the poor heathen before their idols. Where there is *no heart*, there may be lip-work and tongue-work, but there is nothing that God listens to; there is *no prayer*. . . .

Have you forgotten that it is *not fashionable* to pray? It is one of the things that many would be rather ashamed to own. There are hundreds who would sooner storm a breach . . . than confess publicly that they make a habit of prayer. There are thousands who, if obliged to sleep in the same room with a stranger, would lie down in bed without a prayer. . . .

Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin, or sin will choke prayer. I cannot forget this. I look at men's lives. I believe that few pray.

I ask whether you pray, because *diligence in prayer is the secret of eminent holiness*. Without controversy there is a vast difference among true Christians. . . . I believe the difference in nineteen cases out of twenty arises from different habits about private prayer. I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray *little*, and those who are eminently holy pray *much*.

Let me speak . . . to those who do pray. I trust that some who read this tract know well what prayer is, and have the Spirit of adoption. To all such, I offer a few words of brotherly counsel and exhortation. . . .

Brethren who pray, if I know anything of a Christian's heart, you are often sick of your own prayers. . . . There are few children of God who do not often find the season of prayer a season of conflict. The devil

has special wrath against us when he sees us on our knees. . . .

It is essential to your soul's health to make praying a part of the business of every twenty-four hours of your life. . . . Whatever else you make a business of, make a business of prayer.

Never forget that you may tie together morning and evening devotions by an endless chain of short ejaculatory prayers throughout the day. Even in company, or business, or in the very streets, you may be silently sending up little winged messengers to God as Nehemiah did in the very presence of Artaxerxes (Neh 2:4). And never think that time is wasted which is given to God. . . . A Christian never finds he is a loser, in the long run, by persevering in prayer.

Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse. By this the spiritual health may be tested. . . . Oh, let us keep an eye continually upon our private devotions.

The wise Bishop Ryle makes us uncomfortable, and rightly so. He insists on the importance of prayer and chides any Christian who thinks otherwise. But he also encourages us as if good praying is a mountain that can be climbed. As a preacher he is being positive in order to make people aware that the problems and perplexities of prayer are not insolvable. And he is right, as we will now try to show.

In this book we contend that the key to heartfelt, meaningful, enriching realism in our prayers is threefold: clear realization of the reality of God, continual practice of the presence of God, and constant endeavor to please God every day of our lives. A word, now, about each.

Clear realization of the reality of God springs from knowing those facts about him that he himself has told us in holy Scripture. More of that in a moment.

Continual practice of the presence of God, in Brother Lawrence fashion, springs from awareness that one is always under God's eye and in God's hands, and as a Christian, is in the intimate company of God, whom we

know as the holy Trinity—the holy Father, the holy Son and the Holy Spirit, the he who is they and the they who are he. Everybody’s life on this earth is like a hike through scenic open country, which, with its ups and downs, smooth places and rough places, sets both difficulties and delights before each person who travels through it. The Christian’s life has in it the same ups and downs that mark the lives of other people, but Christians hike in company with friends: and we are not thinking here of human friends, though ordinarily they are there too, but of these three divine Friends, who never leave one’s side. As with human friends who come along with you when you go hiking, you rejoice in the fellowship of the holy Three and in what they bring that will help you along. You are glad of their company, and you do not forget for a single moment that they are there, which is what the practice of God’s presence basically means. We will say more about this in the next chapter.

Constant endeavor to please God springs from love to God, called forth by wonder at the divine work of creation that surrounds us and by a greater wonder at the divine work of redemption that saves us. Each of us knows the love of the Father because, fully aware that it was not in us to love him, he nonetheless loved us to the point of sending his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10). Each of us knows the love of the Son because he “loved me and gave himself for me,” as truly as he did for Paul (Gal 2:20). And each of us knows the love of the Spirit because, having renewed our hearts by uniting us to Christ our risen Savior, he now indwells us to make us Christlike in character, and is grieved if we stray from the path of holiness (Eph 4:30). Jesus taught that the first commandment, the great and most important one, is “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). Realizing the love of the holy Three, who in the unity of their being are the “Lord my God” to each of us, we are motivated supremely by what Isaac Watts called “the debt of love I owe” to love of the Three-in-One in response, and we find ourselves saying—praying!—with William Cowper:

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love thee, and adore;
O for grace to love thee more!

How then should we express our love for God, such as it is? In a word, by seeking to please him. The best definition of love focuses on the purpose of making the loved one great in all appropriate ways. We cannot, of course, confer greatness on God, but we celebrate his greatness and so exalt him and render him homage by our praise, by our direct obedience, and by always trying to do that which, of all the options open to us, we calculate will please him most. Thus we glorify him. The three notions meld into one: loving God, pleasing God and glorifying God, the composite goal of the Christian's life. Following this track will lead us to a fruitful and fulfilling experience of the struggle of prayer rather than a frustrating one; that, we trust, will become increasingly clear as we proceed.

The way into the life of pleasing God is opened by realizing God's reality and practicing his presence, about both of which we have more to say. We give our attention now to the first of these, which we will write about at some length.

That the Bible tells us a great deal about God is hardly news, but we suspect that many Christians need to slap their own wrists rather sharply for neglecting it. (When did your church last mount a series of sermons or classes on the character qualities of God? When did you last make a study of them?) Certainly, the fuzziness of some Christians' ideas about our God is startling. Said a lady to a bishop, "But, bishop, surely we all believe in a sort of a something?" "A sort of a something" is as far, it seems, as some people's understanding goes. But we never "pray aright," as James Montgomery put it, until we are properly abreast of what the Bible displays to us regarding God.

In the remainder of this chapter we will set before you eight truths that the church's teachers have recognized over a period of nearly two

thousand years that the Bible presents to us regarding the nature and action of God. It is surely a significant fact that from the age of the apostles to our own time the huge majority of those who receive the Bible as the Word of God have not had *any* serious doubts and uncertainties as to the Bible's view of God. Until very recently this has been an area of substantive agreement in all parts of the church in a very striking way. A lot of what Christians as a body once knew has, however, been forgotten in this era of biblical illiteracy, and we need now to spend a little time bringing it back.

Our first move must be to clear the ground by putting out of our minds the fantasies about God that the human imagination so readily comes up with. We hear people say, "I like to think of God in such-and-such a way . . ." Let it be said, loud and clear, that this "I like" mindset guarantees that all concepts of God that we form by our speculation and wishful thinking will be seriously wrong. Sin, the anti-God syndrome in our mental, moral and spiritual system, ensures that this will be so. Such ideas in fact lead only to a bottom line of uncertainty, so that people end up confused and bewildered about the God who is supposed to be the focus of their lives. We ask you, therefore, to turn your back deliberately on the world of theological guesswork and dreams, and to concentrate with us entirely on the Bible, where God himself bears witness about himself in order that we may begin to know him as he is. It has been facetiously said that the favorite flower of preachers must be the sweet pea, since the keywords in their sermon headings so often begin with the letter *p*. We ask to be taken seriously as we now delineate the God of the Bible under eight headings of which this is true. We hope that the alliteration will help to make these essential truths about God memorable and clear.

THIS IS YOUR GOD

Truth 1: God is personal. Personhood, or personality, is the highest category of existence that we know. C. S. Lewis tells the story of a young lady

who was brought up by parents who saw themselves as exponents of advanced thought. They believed that the personal category was unworthy of God, and so they taught their daughter to think of him as “higher substance.” When she got to years of discretion and unpacked the contents of her mind, she realized that all these years she had been thinking of God as an infinitely extended rice pudding. And since she wasn’t a devotee of rice pudding, it was not in fact at all a helpful idea. In truth, impersonal ideas about God are radically inferior to his true being. Depersonalized deity is, thought wise, always a disaster.

In the Bible God is personal; that is to say, he is a being who speaks of himself as “I” and addresses us humans as “you.” From Genesis to Revelation, not only do we find him speaking that way, but we see him relating to people, person to person, in a fully personal way. God is not an it, and we must not allow ourselves to think of God as an object, as if we could stand apart from him as observers watching him in the way that a biologist might watch the antics of a tadpole. No, no, no! God is always a subject, never a mere object. He is always above us, never below us. God presents himself to us in personal terms, and we must always think of him in personal terms as the God who is *here* and who confronts us and has his eye on us and takes an interest in us as persons just as we, being persons ourselves, take a personal interest in each other.

Since God is personal, it should come as no surprise to find that his relationship to humans involves two-way speech. God addresses Bible characters (and thereby us) using language, and we, like Bible characters, are called to converse with God, using language. There is no linguistic relationship between the biologist and his tadpole, but there is a linguistic relationship between you and me, and between us and God. Today, if we may put it so, God communicates with humankind in writing, as by letter (the written word of God), and humans in response communicate with God in direct speech, as by phone (prayer). But none of this would be possible if God were not personal.

Truth 2: God is plural. The first hint of this in the Bible is the mysteri-

ous *us* of Genesis 1:26, “Let *us* make man in *our* image” (emphasis added). In the creation story, the plurality of God isn’t taken any further, but that mysterious *us* at the beginning of the Bible sticks in the mind as a pointer to what would later be made clear. Then in the New Testament, God is revealed as truly and personally plural. God is a Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three persons within the unity of God’s being, three persons who relate to each other as persons, and who operate as a team for the salvation of God’s people. Even though the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, the reality of the Trinity was there “in solution” all along. (The church’s formulated doctrine of the Trinity was a third- and fourth-century development, focusing on this fact.) The three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are distinct in the New Testament, though it has no technical terms for expressing their shared life, nor do the writers ever pause to tell us that when they say “God” they are usually, like Jesus, speaking of the Father rather than of the three together, but they make it very clear that the three are one in both being and purpose, and they work together for our salvation. Whatever other aspects of the Trinity-in-unity are beyond our understanding, this united strategy of saving sinners is as clear as can be.

In John 3 Jesus introduced Nicodemus to the truth of the Trinity when he talked to him, first, about being born again by the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God the Father, and then about faith in Jesus himself as the one who would die for our salvation. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up [on the cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (That is Jesus talking about himself.) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:14-16). There you have the truth of the Trinity—the Father giving us the Son to suffer for us, and the Spirit renovating us within to bring us into the Father’s kingdom—and this truth runs all the way through the New Testament. The description of it as there “in solution” thus truly fits. Think of a liquid (tea or coffee, say) with sugar dis-

solved in it. The sugar is now in solution, but a chemist could crystallize it out. And similarly in the New Testament one can crystallize out the doctrine of the Trinity—the divine team working as one to bring us sinners into the fullness of eternal life.

Since the nature of the Trinity (one God in three persons) is beyond our understanding, we rightly call it a mystery. But since the fact of the Trinity is clear in the New Testament, with equal rightness we affirm it as a truth and a doctrine—that is, a truth to be taught. It is a foundational truth, without which the gospel itself cannot be stated. The gospel is the good news of God the Father planning our salvation, God the Son, the Mediator, achieving it for us, and God the Holy Spirit applying it to us as the gracious, willing guest who indwells us. Deny the Trinity, and consequently the incarnation and the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit who according to the Nicene Creed is “the Lord and giver of life,” and the gospel, like the deacon’s fabled “one-horse shay,” simply falls to pieces.

Truth 3: God is perfect. What this means is that God could not be better from any standpoint than in fact he is. He is not lacking anything or deficient in any way or needing any improvement. No, God is beyond all of that; he is already and eternally perfect, of his own kind, which is a kind that is unique to himself. In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses his name twice. A name, in the Bible world of thought, signifies the nature of the person whose name it is. God’s first self-naming is at the burning bush, where God encounters Moses and sends him back to Egypt to bring his people out of slavery into a land of their own that God had promised to their ancestors long before. Moses thinks this a daunting assignment. After all he is not on the best of terms with either Pharaoh’s people or his own at this point. He is, indeed, what we would call a refugee from Egypt. So Moses says, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is your name?’ what shall I say to them?” And in Exodus 3:14-15, we read how God answers that question. He says to Moses, “I AM

WHO I AM,” which then becomes *Yahweh*, meaning “I AM,” for short, as Bill is short for William and Bess for Elizabeth. “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD [Yahweh, YHWH] . . . has sent me to you.’”

What, we ask, is going on here? *Yahweh*, the four-consonant Hebrew word which Christians used to render as “Jehovah,” is the covenant name God gives himself to express his commitment to his people. In that far-off world, God would not be your God if he did not give you his name. For God’s people to know his name was thus the sign and proof of his bonding with them, and by telling them God’s name, Moses would be confirming that fact. But what did the name itself mean? The phrase, “I am who I am,” can also be rendered, “*I will be what I will be*,” or, “I am *what I am*.” The thought expressed by this name was thus, in the first instance, an answer to the question “How does God exist?” He exists, it tells us, as the God of eternal and self-sustaining self-determination. He simply is and always was and ever will be, working out his will in sovereignty over his world. He is the God who is there, who is everywhere present and everywhere in control. He ordained what is now and ordains what will be. It is as if God, by giving himself that name, says to Moses and to us, “I am and I will be what I am and what I choose to be, forevermore. You are not in charge of things, but I am.” Here we see the perfection of God’s being—omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omniscient—which in itself is matter for praise, as many of the Psalms show.

There is, however, a further question that we ask about God; namely, how does he behave? That question is answered by the second account of God telling Moses his name, which comes in Exodus 34, straight after the ugly business with the golden calf. Moses had gone up Mount Sinai to receive the laws of God, and while Moses was communing with God, his people in their impatience and unbelief had made the calf and plunged into a pagan orgy in front of it. When Moses had cleaned up the mess, breaking the tablets of the law in the process, he went up Sinai again to receive a replacement, and while he was there, “The LORD de-

scended in the cloud and stood with him [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD” (Ex 34:5). (“The LORD” in the Hebrew is “Yahweh.” Every time you meet the word “LORD” in capitals in any version of the English Bible, it is a rendering of *Yahweh*.)

“The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation’” (Ex 34:6-7).

God here declares that he acts toward humans in grace and mercy, which they need, yet also in holiness that will express itself in retribution toward those who do not take him seriously and do not respond in penitence for sin to his overtures of love. This is God’s moral perfection, as manifested in all his dealings with the human race that he has made. The purity that sees lawless, self-aggrandizing action and loveless, self-seeking motivation as polluting defilements is integral to his perfection, and makes his grace to sinners endlessly amazing in the eyes of all who receive it.

God’s moral perfection is constantly celebrated in the Psalms. In Psalm 86:5, for instance, the psalmist writes, “You, O Lord, are good.” (*Good* in the Old Testament means generous and kind and gracious; it is a word of very broad meaning.) The sentence continues: “You, O Lord, are good and forgiving, / abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.” This echo of Exodus 34 leads on to verse 10: “You are great and do wondrous things; / you alone are God.” Yes, God is good, God is great, and all that he does is worthy of praise. God is perfect in every way.

Truth 4: God is powerful. Here we expand the hints we dropped a few pages back. Theologians express this truth by saying that God is *omnipotent*, meaning he is able to do everything that he chooses to do, just as Psalm 135:6 affirms, “Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, / in heaven and on earth.” They amplify this by saying God is also *omnipresent*. He

permeates every bit of his world, all the time as Psalm 139:1-6 shows. That is one of the dimensions of his power. And God is *omniscient*. He knows everything, literally everything that has been, is and shall be, and he knows us through and through. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me! . . . / you discern my thoughts . . . / and are acquainted with all my ways” (Ps 139:1-3). A series of declarations in the psalms including Psalms 93; 95:3; 96:10; 97; 98:6; 99 celebrate the fact that the Lord reigns. God is *king*. The image shown in these psalms is of a God of absolute monarchy, for all the kings of the ancient world were absolute monarchs in direct charge of everything within their kingdoms. The psalms are saying that God is that sort of king—and to a degree of absoluteness that no earthly monarch ever could match. He is always and everywhere on top; he is the absolute master in his own universe. “The LORD reigns.” “The LORD is king forever and ever” (Ps 97:1; 10:16). Nothing escapes his cognizance and his control. This is a constantly stabilizing thought for the people of God.

Truth 5: God is purposeful. Here again, we expand hints already dropped. God has an end in view in all that he does. What is God’s purpose in this world that he has made? It is twofold. On the one hand, it is the honoring and glorifying of his incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who in turn glorifies the Father by his obedience. There is much in the New Testament highlighting these paired purposes. Scripture allows us, for instance, to listen in on Jesus’ anguished prayer to his Father as he agonized over his forthcoming obedience in Gethsemane “to the point of death” (Phil 2:8). “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” Then Jesus goes to his sleeping disciples and begs them, unavailingly, to share these moments of prayer with him, after which he returns to prayer and again expresses his resolve to obey his Father, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done” (Mt 26:39-42). Jesus’ actions in Gethsemane and after honored the purpose conceived by his Father from the beginning. He honored his Father through painful obedience “to the point of

death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). But the Father also honored and glorified the Son. We see this at his baptism, where the Spirit descended in the form of a dove and a voice (the Father’s) from heaven announced, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). And again at Jesus’ transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appeared with him while Peter, James and John watched: “A bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’” (Mt 17:5). Later, Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me from the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24). Following his humiliation came his glorification, which remains an everlasting reality. The divine purposes were formed before time and extend to eternity. We, the followers of Jesus, are drawn into those purposes through Christ’s love, death, risen life and ongoing intercession for us. No higher destiny can be imagined.

The truth is, however, that glorifying Jesus, who glorified the Father through his obedience, is only one side of God’s purpose. The second aspect of it, bound up with the first, is the holiness and happiness of God’s adopted family, which is the church, the people of God, millions of redeemed sinners including you and us. Then a third element of it is a consequence of, indeed an ingredient in, the second, namely, the church’s grateful worship, which belongs to the happiness of which we are speaking. The way it works is that the Son, as the Father’s agent and the mediator of his grace, gives the saints glory, that is, the blessing of a new inner life, a new heavenly hope and a new present joy, while the saints give the Son, along with the Father, the honor and praise that are jointly their due. The word *blessing* is used in two senses in Scripture to mark this, just as the word *glory* is. *Glory* in Scripture means both God on display (the glory God shows) and also people praising God (the glory we give). We give him glory for putting himself on display in our lives and for our eternal benefit. It is the same with *blessing*. God blesses us by his

gifts. The Father blesses us by the gift of his Son, and the Son blesses us by his gift of salvation. Then we bless God by words of gratitude, devotion, thanksgiving and joy in his presence. The dual use of the words *glory* and *blessing* points to two aspects of the one divine purpose. The honor and glory of the Father's incarnate Son is the first, and the holiness and happiness of the Father's adopted family, including the church's praise for everything good, the second. This is the purpose of God.

Within this purpose the Lord Jesus comes to us through the Holy Spirit in a true personal approach as the Father's messenger and gift-bearer, and enters into an awesomely close relationship with us. He said to his disciples: "No longer do I call you servants; . . . but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15:15). It was as if he said, "Understand that as of now, I keep nothing from you. I open my heart to you as friends do to their friends. Each of you must think of me as your friend, as I think of you as my friends." We who are Jesus' disciples should hear him as saying the same to us. The way of friends is to enjoy being together and as far as possible to have no secrets from each other. The Christian life is a matter of developing friendship with God, friendship that flows from the Father's gift to us of our Lord Jesus Christ, who on his own behalf, now makes friends with us in his own way. This too is an aspect of the purpose of God, namely, a transforming friendship with our glorified Savior whereby our life becomes a case of friend loving friend, friend serving friend, friend enjoying intimacy with friend, all along the line. We should think of ourselves that way as Christians; we are friends of Jesus Christ and of his Father, and we are to live out the reality of this friendship through prayer.

Truth 6: God is a promise-keeper. Before the words *promise keepers* were ever used for a contemporary men's movement, becoming a promise-keeper was a character quality that God established as his own. So the basis of all our asking in prayer, as of all of our trusting in God, is and must be knowing his promises, claiming them, relying on them and

holding fast to them whatever happens, in the confidence that they will always be kept. Second Peter 1:4 speaks of the “precious and very great promises” that God has given us. Paul says: “All the promises of God find their Yes” in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). And, as we will see in due course, receiving God’s promises and trusting those promises is an integral building block, a truly foundational activity in a Christian life. Promise-based prayer is the reality of which we will be speaking throughout this book. At the end of his life Joshua, reviewing the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, affirmed to Israel’s leaders: “Not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed” (Josh 23:14; see also Josh 21:45). The New Testament views Abraham as the classic model of saving faith, and Paul declares that trusting God’s promise with praise was the essence of Abraham’s prayer as he waited for the predicted son and heir. “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness’ ” (Rom 4:20-22). Promise-trusting faith is indeed at the center of the biblical prayer pattern.

Truth 7: God is paternal. That is, in his perfection, God behaves toward those who are his in a fatherly way that, as such, is flawless. The biblical ideal of fatherhood blends authority, fidelity, affection, care, discipline, long-suffering and protection in a course of sustained love that aims always at the children’s advance into strength, wisdom and maturity. God in his triunity relates to all his people according to this fatherly ideal, and more specifically, within that triunity, the first person of the holy Three does so. He, the eternal Father of Jesus the eternal Son, in whom we have been brought into our new life, adopts us sinners to be his sons and heirs with Jesus, who thus becomes our elder brother. Now by means of the ministry to us of the Son and the Spirit, our heavenly Father is leading us home to full Christlikeness and eternal glory.

In the Sermon on the Mount, to look no further, Jesus says much

about how the Father relates to us. “Your *Father* who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:4, 6, 18). “Your *Father* knows what you need before you ask him” (v. 8). “Our *Father* in heaven . . . give . . . forgive . . . deliver” (vv. 9-13). “The Gentiles seek after these things [material supplies], and your heavenly *Father* knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (vv. 32-33). “Ask, and it will be given to you. . . . If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your *Father* who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” (7:7-11). In light of all this, and much more besides that the New Testament tells us about God’s love for us his children, we can pray with perfect confidence to the Father as one who will never fail us. Human fathers may let us down, but not God. We can know with certainty that our praying will be heard and responded to in the way that is not only wisest in terms of God’s own total purposes but also is best in the long run for us as the individuals we are. Thus we see that it is a truly wonderful thing to be in God’s paternal hands.

Truth 8: God is praiseworthy. Our eight “sweet Ps” have now shown us a series of key truths about God’s character, his way of existing and his way of acting. God is *personal, plural, perfect, powerful, purposeful, promise-keeping, paternal* and, finally, in light of all that has preceded, a *praiseworthy* God. God merits all the adoration that we can give him, for the beauty, the goodness and the faithfulness that he shows us in so many different ways. It is helpful, in our praying, to make a distinction between praise and thanks, and to make sure we express both. Prayers of thanks focus to some extent on *us*. We thank God for particular gifts given to us and others personally, and for general gifts bestowed on all. Praise, on the other hand, focuses directly on God. We praise him because of who and what he is. It is the difference between one spouse saying to the other, “You are the most understanding person I know; that’s one reason I love you so much” and “Thanks for the sandwich; I needed it.” Both kinds of prayers are appropriate. But because we are naturally

self-centered creatures, we tend to major on thanks, because God's gifts and mercies to us constantly fill our minds. Yet God himself is to be praised, for he is supremely praiseworthy.

Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;

for he is beautiful,⁴ and a song of praise is fitting. (Ps 147:1)

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. (Ps 150:6)

So it is good and right to occasionally wrestle our attention away from ourselves and turn it toward God in prayers of praise.

What this book offers, as you can now see, is less a “how to” than a “who to” (more grammatically, a “to whom”) approach to praying. Realizing the reality of God, as we have described him, is the exercise of heart that sets prayer on the right footing. And now note what follows. In the light of this knowledge of who and what our God is, you and we have to be clear who we are when we come to God (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) in our prayers. And that is a major matter.

To our everyday relations with people we respect—senior friends, acquaintances, interviewers, counselors, leaders, negotiators, teachers, whoever—we make a point of adjusting to what we know is their wavelength; we take care to be responsive and cooperative in light of who they are, and not pretend to be something other than what we are. Encountering them requires us to relate to them with realism, honesty and humility, every time and in every connection. So with God. When we ask God for an interview, requesting his attention (which is what we actually do when we pray), we need to be very clear in our own minds not only about who he is but also about who we are and what constitutes a humble, honest, realistic, reverent attitude toward him. That means remembering that we come to God as redeemed rebels, sinners saved by grace

⁴The ESV text reads “for it is pleasant,” but a marginal note provides the alternative “for he is beautiful.”

to be not just servants but adopted sons and daughters of God the Father, not just followers but friends of Jesus the Mediator, privileged persons therefore, now enjoying a fellowship and a destiny that are the opposite of what we deserved.

Thomas Goodwin, a Puritan, said somewhere that before beginning to pray he would “take a turn up and down” in his own past life, in order to make vivid to himself each time the depth of the mercy by which, as a new creation in Christ, he now lived. “Lord, teach us to pray,” said the disciples. “When you pray, say: *Father*,” was how Jesus’ reply began. No one can call on God as *Father* with full Christian meaning who has not known the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. So approaching God as Father with a full realization of all that is involved not only in doing it but in being able to do it is where real, realistic Christian praying begins. And then the more we appreciate the holy love of our God in Christ, the more we will realize what sinners we are, and the more we realize what sinners we are, the more we will appreciate the holy love of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and the more real our praying will then become.

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