



Talking To God

How I Found Peace

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.
John 14:27*

John H. King

Talking to God: How I Found Peace

by John King

*But if ... you seek the LORD your God,
you will find him
if you seek him with all your heart
and with all your soul.*
— Deuteronomy 4:29

"We have not searched for Him. He has searched us out and found us.
All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God."
Vincent J. Donovan

Cover: The Lane: The lane led from the main road unto campus where I spent 3 years preparing for ministry. I used to take walks along this path conversing with God. It now symbolizes to me all prayer.

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To my beloved grandchildren

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The Proof of God

The Proof, indeed, that God is there,
The guarantee He's true,
Is only found in a life of prayer.
It's the same for me and you.

In grievous depth or joyous height
By prayer keep one eye on God,
His peace within the darkest night
Is the Shepherd's staff and rod.

And then: take counsel in His Word
In tearful times, rejoice!
More oft than not in prayer is heard
The Shepherd's reassuring voice.

I cannot tell you what His will;
No theology or creed
Maps out the path He takes, and still,
He does what He decreed.

How oft we seek but what is lust
To dream of better things
And prayer seems but a carnal trust
And faith enriches kings.

But that's not prayer, No! Not at all;
Our wants but misplaced greed!

No! Prayer is mercy's clarion call
For God to intercede.

Man's greatest thoughts are only crumbs
Of providential fare.
The banquet spread of blessings comes
As an answer to a prayer.

The heavens shout, "Look here! Look here!"
And thunderously skies applaud.
In standing ovation above this sphere
Acclaiming the works of God.

But yet much disbelief persists
In the slight of the skeptic's pen.
Yet prayer, unswayed, by faith insists,
"Expect God to create again."

Yet miracles are not the clue
Of God's empowered Word.
His creative genius does imbue
Each prayerful cry that's heard.

To walk with God as Enoch had
Speaks not of spiritual pride,
But a life's awareness thru good and bad
Of the God who walks beside.

So, talk to Him! That is the key!
Seek Him; for, He is near.
The God Who others cannot see
For you, He will be there.

Dear Grandchild

I have written this brief work to point out to you that God is much more than a church word—or a word spoken in the heat of emotion. God can be real to you. But knowing God or believing in God is not possible without a desire to talk to Him. This is the same for any relationship. To get to know someone, we need to communicate with them. We need to talk to them. The benefit of praying, talking to God, is a peaceful awareness that He is real. There is no simpler way of saying it. The verse from the Bible on the title page is God’s promise to all of us:

But if ... you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. — Deuteronomy 4:29

No doubt this raises questions as to what this must mean. Do we have to attend church? Must we say grace at the dinner table? What is “prayer” all about anyways? Well, the burden of this book is not to tell you what to do but to provide you with insight to discover answers for yourself.

This book is my journey in prayer as I grew older. It is a witness to what hopefully I have discovered about God and a little insight into a few verses in the Bible. I found out, for one, that Psalm 34:18 is true:

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

I have never cried unto the Lord when He didn’t hear me. This has been your grandfather’s life. I have talked to the Lord about all kinds of things that troubled me and I have found Him to be a friend. The poem in the forward is not just a quaint rhyme to me. This poem which I wrote is filled with deep meaning for me. As your grandfather, I

John King

want you to know that you are always on my heart and on my mind and in my prayers.

Love always,
Your Grandpa King

Acknowledgments

I must first thank my sons for the many conversations over the course of the years while they puzzled over spiritual realities and came to conclusions which helped define their worldviews. This work was born out of that enquiry.

I am grateful to Noreen Saemenes who is my proofreader. Despite her many other commitments she herself retains a love for writing and has become my expert in residence for many of my books.

I am thankful for my beloved wife, Joyce, who was “widowed” during the long hours needed to accomplish such a task as this—although now in our senior years I find myself wanting to spend quality time with her more and more—and I believe she with me.

And I have to mention my grandchildren for whom this work is dedicated. They represent the continuance of those dreams for a better life that I, like all grandparents, envision with hope and promise. This book is a part of that legacy I lovingly bequeath them.

Introduction

Having chosen to introduce this work with a letter written to my grandchildren, a second introduction is required for some important preliminary remarks. Writing to grandchildren, it is important I write in nonreligious, non-theological language. Most religious works are written to religious people who are accustomed to the words and phrases so familiar in litanies, hymns, praise choruses, etc. I must assume at least one grandchild might not be familiar with such wording; so, I wrote this book in plainer English.

Bible stories, too, are familiar to anyone who had spent the first dozen years of his or her life regularly attending some religious training. But these same stories might be untold to my grandchildren; so, I will hopefully write sufficient detail to tell the story for the first time—at least enough detail to make my point.

The overarching reason for writing this work is to invite the reader, and first and foremost, my grandchildren, to talk to God, if they have not already, and give God the chance to become real in a relationship with them. Prayer is not a technical exercise only performed by religious persons or those expert in writing and reading prayers. Prayer does not require training or lessons in wording or presentation. And prayer, as I refer to it here, is less public and more private.

The reader might be thinking of prayer only in terms of its public use or use in church. I am writing about private conversations with God. Prayer in this way is a matter of heart not mouth, passion not position. I pray walking or

driving or sitting in a hot bath more often than kneeling beside my bed or at a church altar. This does not matter to God as much as we might think. Prayer, also, is not a matter of wording except to say, I maintain it proper to respect God and talk to Him as a friend, who does listen and wants to help.

Many people are amiss in not giving God a chance to be personal, not taking a chance with faith to test the possibilities for such a relationship. We all are limited in some way by past experiences. It is a leap to try something totally outside the comfort zone of familiar ways and habits. Most of what anyone believes is built on those experiences. Some people will never pray to a God they do not believe in. Religious people are the same way. They may not admit it, but much of their ritual is simply an analogy of their beliefs; which then makes those same beliefs appear more reasonable.

It is important to emphasize that talking to God is not something only old people do. It is incorrect to conclude that if someone prays, they must know how to pray. This puts them on another, higher, spiritual level from the rest of us. No! Anyone can talk to God regardless of age or where they think they are “spiritually.”¹

By praying or talking to God I am talking about conversing with Him, speaking from the heart. I do not mean some scripted monologue or publicly acceptable prescription that is pleasing to the human ear but not actually the way you talk to others. Your heart in your own words!

And what about “theology”? Some, if not most,

¹ Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak: I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.

christians think in terms of some theology. If they read this, they will be looking for the wording that matches the dogmas they endorse. Problem is: this book is not a theological discourse or position paper. Christians, you might know, are called “believers” because of the doctrines they—well—*believe*. In other words, a lot of *faith* is put into one’s theology. In fact, the word “faith” can mean “doctrine” or “the religious belief of Christians.”² I decided to put the theological information in the footnotes. Most of the Bible verses I reference are written there.

I am not against what pastors or church leaders say or how they pray. The way they pray in public or how they instruct others to pray, is not my concern here. What is of concern is your privilege to talk to God *your* way in your own words. God longs for the simplicity of a heart open to seeking Him out, because they want to get to know Him.

I hope to point out the endearing friendship *anyone* can have with God. I don’t want to study Him in this book (which is what theology is). I want to simply embrace the relationship through on ongoing conversation with Him. I want the youngest grandchild to know that no specific education or religious training is ever required by God before He will listen to your pain or notice your tears. But we need to talk to Him about all this because He wants you to notice that He is there for you. So, nothing here is intended to challenge or contradict church doctrine.

I guess this is as good a place as any from which to start:

² Ephesians 4:13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God

The Theological God

Truth be told: way too much time is spent in talking about God and not enough time spent talking to Him.

Theology is the study of who God is and what He wants with us, but in a postmodern world our theological God might be dead. A god who depends on our ingenuity for description, a god who cannot otherwise reveal himself, is no god at all. He is but the invention of our thoughts. As convincing as the philosophical argument for His existence might be, debating him into existence is purely an academic exercise. A life of prayer is the only way to attest to His reality. If He is real, He needs to step up and show Himself real and He does this when we talk to Him. Too often, believers call on the clergy to get answers to problems commonly sought after from God. It is important to let God speak for Himself and this is a matter for prayer.

The unspoken and even unthought truth is that theology is intended to define and understand who God is and how He might respond in this circumstance or that. Yet no one's "theology" as such has Him figured out as if He were a scientifically observable event. In a debate with modernists and atheists, we may soon discover that theology makes a weak contestant. Postmodernism begins with the premise that God is unobservable by any law of science. They argue that *the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence*. But for the believer who is "walking and talking with Him in everyday life," as author Joy Dawson (of *Youth With a Mission*) once put it, the proof of God's reality is undeniable.

Those who pray could argue that God is there ...but you have to know where to look. David, the Psalmist, wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.³

"Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom."⁴

Our theologies are imperfect, as they must be for God to be the incomprehensible Being that He is. Book knowledge alone is not enough to describe what Paul the Apostle in the Bible called "beyond tracing."

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"⁵

To begin to explore the vast spiritual universe that is the heart of God, we need to be living in an atmosphere of ceaseless prayer. And I have discovered in those times when I am focused on my spiritual condition and wanting to get closer to God, that as challenging as it might be, such a prayer life is very rewarding.

Not a Theology

This writing is, therefore, not intended as a work of theology. This book is more a journey—my journey—in learning about God. This work offers an approach at understanding the dynamics of talking to God and ways of hearing from Him that define a relationship with Him. Prayer brings to life the conviction that He is in fact an immanent⁶ God, a personal God, "the God Who walks beside."

³ Psalms 19:1.

⁴ Psalms 145:3.

⁵ Roman 11:33.

⁶ God communicates Himself to humanity as He really is in the divine Life. — Wiki

Once again: to learn God through an academic theology is comparable to trying to figure out how to relate to a spouse by reading “Spouses for Dummies.” Spouses will always be full of surprises. Such a book hasn’t begun to unravel the mystery that is the person with whom we share our lives. Rather, we are encouraged to listen, communicate, and develop a meaningful relationship with them. And it is no different with God. There is no crash college course that can replace a lifetime of hand-holding ...and with God this translates into praying.⁷

God is not a science to be discovered, or an organization to be joined, or a doctrine to be believed. He is the God we dare to know through prayer.

The Old, Old Story

There are many theologies, or many ways of looking at the Bible to determine what it says and why. And that study is in fact a study of God since the Bible is the book that describes the who, what and why of the Judeo-Christian God: Who He is, What He does and Why. This is *theology*. There are many factors that go into deciding how we see this study, how we interpret the Bible and how important we think the Bible is or should be as a tool for studying about God.

Consequently, different schools of thought are born and die. Religious groups are created and fade away. Theologies are born and die as well—dependent more on changing times or evolving social conditions than reason or an unbiased study.

There is, however, in this haystack of confusing ideas a

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 pray continually

genuinely christian belief which has resisted change. It is the only important piece of christian theology which I will share with you. It is the only thing in all the discussions over what the Bible says or might say that is worth sharing. Some of us have affectionately referred to it as the “Old, Old Story.” This label has become a euphemism for the old theology which is believed to be under cultural assault in a changing world.

I love to tell the story;
'twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love.

That story is the story of a Savior, whose name is Jesus, who died a cruel death on an ancient roman cross. He did this as part of God’s plan to make it possible to know God and become friends with God—something previously not possible. In simple words: Prayer works because Jesus died (that was the first Good Friday) and rose again (on Easter morning).

Some scholars see the Bible as simply an ancient book with literary value and not much more. Some see the value of the Bible as a study of a religious age and how such religious memes at the time shaped social norms and practices.

Theology has indeed changed. We are now in an age of reason that sees the “Old, Old Story” as a hinderance to a new era of social acceptance of all cultures because this story says that only those who believe that Jesus died for us are able to genuinely befriend God in prayer.

Now we live in an age of a wider dependence on science for answers. This has triggered a massive revision of the Biblical story to make it relevant. Even in the Seminaries, the universities where the Bible is specifically studied,

there are theories now that call in question the older ideas I was raised on. The Old, Old Story has mutated into a New, New Story which is in some ways unrecognizable as a divinely inspired narrative.

For me the message of the Bible is a very simple one and can embrace everyone and all cultures. It is the story of a God of mercy who sought out my friendship and who now I can talk to, a personal God that walks beside me. This is all I wish to find in this haystack of philosophical wrangling. The Bible stories are the testimonies of the ancestors of our faith who found Him to be personal. Abraham, the father of both the Jews and the Arabs, saw Him while standing in the doorway of his tent⁸ and invited the Lord and His entourage to dinner. David called Him his shepherd⁹ while enjoying the security of God's rod and staff regardless of where he happened to be. God spoke with Moses one on one, "*as one speaks to a friend.*"¹⁰

Sarah Adams' song published in 1841 is still my impassioned cry:

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee¹¹!

The Cross

The single part of the christian theology that I believe defines christianity is that to get closer to God, we need to accept Jesus' death on the Roman Cross as necessary to make this possible. The details may be theologically

⁸ Genesis 18:1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

⁹ Psalms 23.

¹⁰ Exodus 33:11 The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwLl5nY5WPI>

sketchy but the event is true. Dorothy Sayers who wrote mystery novels wrote a play, "Man Born to be King" in which she had Mary, Jesus' mom, looking up at Him while He was dying on the cross and saying, "*From the beginning of history until now, this is the only thing that has ever really happened.*"

Exactly how Jesus' death leads to a friendship with God is a mystery that all theologies are inadequate to explain¹² but it is the message of the Bible. The Apostle Paul admitted,

...we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.¹³

The Bible's explanation is an analogy with slavery. It sees all humankind as trapped in a behavior that precludes any interest in friendship with God. According to the Bible, it was human nature itself that clearly had no interest in this friendship, even though people were religious. Religious people feared God. They didn't love Him. And so man was believing in a God they dare not get too close to, who seemed to demand their dedication in ritual form and sacrifices. So when the real God stands up one day and declares through the prophet, "*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice...*"¹⁴ religious minds were poleaxed by this revelation.

¹² I Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:7.

¹⁴ Hosea 6:6. God was looking for them to have the attitudes of mercy; God was desiring that they should have a knowledge of Him, but all they had was a form of religion. They still had the burnt offerings, they still had the sacrifices, but they really didn't have a vital relationship with God. —Chuck Smith

It was easier to invent an imagined god and develop a ritual around a theological framework about that god. He or she becomes a god by which a given religious group could claim special privilege, while they worshipped them. It is far easier to do this than to accept a God who wants to commune with us. It is more demanding on our time to develop a life of prayer, to practice God's presence, to, in short, get involved with God in a relationship with Him. To quote Brother Lawrence:

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.

Public Prayer

There are all kinds of venues for prayer. People sometimes pray together or get together and take turns praying. These are very biblical ideas but they are not what this book or my story is all about. Sometimes community prayer meetings are not what they are purported to be. In writing this book, I have no direct interest in saying much about them.¹⁵ When we pray, remember that we are talking to God.

Sometimes public praying needs to be politically correct, and I don't know how to translate my heart in those less offensive terms. When I pray alone and I know I am not wanting to offend anyone, I do not worry about how I say it.

¹⁵ Some, sadly, devolve into gossip sessions or into the opportunity to say something publicly that gives the pray-er a moment of recognition and their spoken thoughts a kind-of accreditation. Some praying is not praying at all—in the truest sense—but a sermonette clothed in eloquent language to make it sound like something that would please God. Some public praying is intended to please the people present or to announce an unwavering commitment to one's theological position.

Sometimes professional *prayers*, people who seem to know how to pray in public, introduce an eloquence that I can not emulate—to my personal sense of embarrassment. I tend to remain silent. This is not to say that eloquence is in and of itself wrong. When Peter, the Apostle, spoke to the crowd on the Day of Pentecost at the beginning of the christian church, the original text says he “*spoke as an oracle.*”¹⁶ Sometimes passion is eloquent.

But this story is the story of my most private moments talking to God about things I would be reluctant—even embarrassed—to say in public. This is my story about my talking to God, to the one true friend who listens and who is capable of helping me with my troubles and problems. This is not the story of public prayers or eloquent speech but of a heart broken, a man desperate for help, an impassioned tearful cry for God to be here for me or the person or persons I am praying for.

I make my story public because I would encourage the thought in your heart to talk to God. Talk to Him about anything and all things that are on your mind. Treat Him as a best friend, BFF.

A Closed Book

Someone might be asking, “Does God answer back?” The short of it is: Yes, after a fashion. Isn’t the Bible complete

¹⁶ Acts 2:14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd. ...**to speak out, speak forth, pronounce**, not a word of everyday speech, but one “belonging to dignified and elevated discourse, like the Latin: *profari, pronuntiare*; properly it has the force of **to utter or declare oneself, give one’s opinion**, and is used not only of prophets (see Acts 2:4 — adding from the Sept. Ezekiel 13:9; Micah 5:12; 1 Chronicles 25:1), but also of wise men and philosophers (Diag. Laertius 1, 63; 73; 79; whose pointed sayings the Greeks call ἀποφθέγματα).

without further revelations? If this be true, why would God still speak to us? We have what He wants to tell us in the form of our Bible. Does this mean that prayer is only our talking to God? He has no further need to talk to us?

He does speak to us on occasion when our hearts are open to Him through prayer. But prayer is not God telling you or me something no other believer knows. The Bible is not privately interpreted. Prayer is not a claim to spiritual knowledge. What God has revealed as regarding our salvation is expounded sufficiently in the translations of the Bible. This does not, to be clear, deny God the opportunity to speak to us in prayer. I cannot put to fine a point here because God is not limited by my understanding of how He might reveal truth to you or anyone. But I can say with full assurance that in prayer God will speak to our *hearts*.

Prayer does not threaten good study. In fact studying the Bible is a very real aspect of prayer because searching the *written* Word is an aspect of seeking the *living* Word, Jesus. There should be no need to defend translations of the scriptures because someone heard from God in a private moment of soul searching or seeking God.

Claiming that in prayer "*The Lord told me to tell you...*" is a cautionary tale of one person wanting to manipulate another and God is not in this. Prayer is not God telling me to tell you to do anything. When God speaks to me it is for me and about me—not you. God can use another to share His wisdom with us but this is not manipulative on His part. As a student, I kept my distance from one faculty member who was reputed to be very close to God and I feared He might discover my innermost thoughts and want to correct me. This was a sad misunderstanding on

my part. God is not like that!

A life of prayer, ceaseless prayer, is God's way of walking beside us while He sustains our minds¹⁷ and enables us to live a godly life¹⁸. It is not so mysterious—but it is dynamic—and it certainly is biblical. Many bible stories tell the tale of God communing with His prophets, His servants, His friends.

True Prayer

True prayer is talking to God and if spoken in public, those in attendance are merely eavesdropping.

Solomon's prayer for wisdom [1 Kings 3:5-10]¹⁹ or Moses' intercessory prayer for God to spare His people in mercy are a couple examples. [Exodus 33:12-17]²⁰

¹⁷ Isaiah 26:3 You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.

¹⁸ 2 Peter 1:3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

¹⁹ At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. "Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.

²⁰ Moses said to the Lord, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will

Enoch walked with God. Abraham bartered with Him. Moses debated. Elijah begged. Ezekiel prostrated himself in speechless obeisance.

The goal of prayer is not public recognition. [Matthew 6:5]²¹ Prayer is communication in relationship with the God we want to talk to and hear from. We must watch out for a pride that comes with complements about how great a *prayer* we are.

Prayer is not speaking magical words. We already consent to this fact. Nor is it memorized rote without feeling—like the written prayer I prayed in a public ceremony back in 1976 when the town buried the time capsule in the town square. Appropriately, they buried my written prayer with it.

Prayer is not the voice of another's convictions in the hopes that their faith will work for us or we get the words and the theology right. [Matthew 6:7]²² No! Prayer has nothing to do with theology. You can humbly confess that you don't even know what the word "theology" means. All you know is that Jesus died so that you could talk to God!

Speak from a heart that respects our Lord. The God who is the "King of Kings" holds the scepter forth for us to

anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

²¹ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

²² And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

approach.²³ This is what ancient kings did. He is also the God, who tore the curtain down²⁴ to the entrance of the Holy of Holies (This was an inner chamber in the Jewish Temple in which the High Priest went only once a year.)²⁵ The curtain is gone now and this has become the analogy of our entering into God's presence (by prayer) without fear and without an appointment: anytime, anywhere.

Sometimes prayer language is raw, full of passion, and laced with tears. Sometimes prayer becomes the outcries of a broken heart or a panicked mind. Other times prayer is the silence of a heart in pain²⁶ or just wanting to talk to the God we love.

²³ Hebrews 1:8 But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.

²⁴ Luke 23:45 And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Hebrews 10:20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,

²⁵ Leviticus 16:2 he LORD said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

²⁶ Romans 8:26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Answered Prayer

My story is not the story of God's answers to my prayers, but prayer itself. This is the story of the importance of conversing with God for the sake of the relationship with Him. Prayer should be more than solely a selfish interest. My relationship with God should be more important to me than a means of asking for things.

It is in this relationship I have learned to appreciate what the word "request" really means. I call on a God who wants me to speak my heart. I find the confidence to speak openly; yet, with a profound respect for Who He is in my life.

The word *confidence* in the Apostle John's letter speaks of an emboldened honesty to tell God just what we want from Him:

This is the confidence [boldness] we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears us.²⁷

It is incorrect to assume that prayer cannot or should not include, or even be primarily, the list of those things that burden me or weigh heavy on my thoughts and feelings. In fact, my needs should drive my interest in talking to Him! But God is not Santa Claus. God is not my servant. I should be His. My desires are important to Him—after all, I am His creation—but only in the context of becoming more aware of His love for me and opening the way for a more endearing and closer relationship. As the apostle qualified: *according to His will*.

* * *

²⁷ I John 5:14

Carte Blanche

My requests shouldn't be the expectation that God will offer me a carte blanche., rub-the-genie, approach to His kindness. God's great motivators are: His mercy, His love, His kindness, and His caring. These are signs of an active passion, not a passive resignation. God is proactive, not reactive when we talk to Him about our wants. He knows before we ask and is ready to answer; so, He wants us to ask. We must take care not to misinterpret His response when He seemingly does give the answer we expect. The Bible does not teach that we will always get what we want merely by asking. This is reading into the Bible what is not there.

We are not in charge of our happiness. He is! So when Jesus invites us to just "ask," it is not to put us in charge of our own happiness but to highlight His love and the role His grace plays in our well-being. In this regard, I find Jesus' instruction to His disciples an interesting expansion on this idea. Not only should we ask God, we should seek Him and knock as well.

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.²⁸

One scholar observed: *"each of these terms used presents what we desire of God in a different light. We ask for what we wish; we seek for what we miss; we knock for that from which we feel ourselves shut out."*²⁹

God knows my heart, and He is a merciful God. That He will bless me without my praying is a misguided assumption on my part. Praying is part of the relationship.

²⁸ Luke 11:9

²⁹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/jfb/Mat/Mat_007.cfm#Mt7_7

Prayer is communion by which I know Him as merciful. Answered prayer means God is no longer somewhere in the shadows of my belief system. He dwells in the light of my faith.

Prayer is a lifelong endeavor. Praying—not just a prayer—is a lifetime choice because it is the means by which a relationship with God is matured or perfected. One kiss does not a marriage make and one short prayer does not equate to a life of communion with God.

Theologically speaking, the primary purpose for a prayer life should be getting to know God, not to receive things. Even though “requests” are the cookies, the relationship is a necessary focus on the baker, and not just the cookie jar. Or as A.P. Simpson, the Nazarene hymn writer correctly echoes the voice of faith:

Once it was the blessing,
Now it is the Lord;
Once it was the feeling,
Now it is His Word;
Once His gift I wanted,
Now, the Giver own;
Once I sought for healing,
Now Himself alone.

Praying 'For' not 'About'

The Apostle Peter was a married man and knew from experience that there was a connection somehow between his relationship with God (his praying) and his relationship with his wife (his marriage).

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect...so that nothing will hinder your prayers. - 1 Peter 3:7

I have discovered the link. There really is no choice here, although some men might think so. If you love God, you love your wife as well. Clergymen who argue that God is

first suggest a conflict of interest may exist between pleasing God and pleasing a spouse. I disagree. Yes, the Apostle Paul was single and thought it the simpler path to ministry. But he never argued down a marriage relationship as if God were jealous of their affection toward one another or that marriage was a hinderance to His interests in us. It is either both or neither if you are married ...and I think we can expand Peter's idea to include wives respecting husbands as well.

I have talked a ton to the Lord about my wife and if you had been able to listen in, you would not have heard me denigrating her—fairly or unfairly. God is not interested in affixing blame or hearing me project my faults on someone else—least of all my spouse. So, talking to God has to be as honest and real as I can make it. There is no benefit in besmirching the reputation of someone whom God knows all too well and whom God has loved and forgiven even before I arrived. Truthfully, "*God is not mocked;*" so, He cannot be drafted into service to support any misguided notion I might have about my wife or any other relationship. God gives advice; He doesn't take it!

I have discovered that I have a right to my feelings while talking to God. We learn this by overhearing David in prayer in the Psalms. Pick any Psalm he wrote:

Psalms 69:2-4

I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.

Those who hate me without reason
outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause,
those who seek to destroy me.
I am forced to restore
what I did not steal.

“Really, David? *Worn out...without reason...without cause...*” Your enemies outnumber the hairs on your head! (I assume by this that David was not bald.) I doubt life comes to that for most of us, but telling God how we feel and about our pain and fears is not unbiblical in tone. I pray this way only in secret.

There is a marked difference between praying this way and praying for someone in intercessory prayer. When I pray for my sons, I just pray for their well being. But when I pray *about* my spouse and my marriage, it sometimes comes out this way. I can spend more time with God talking about my feelings and my relationships than any other kind of praying. I actually look forward to the next “session” I will have with Him ...and I need no appointment.

No Cursing

I discovered that there is no real value in telling God His business, or giving God hints how to straighten out someone else’s life. Praying for others should express an emotional interest in their well being. This requires a constant focus on the heart to keep our words truthful before God. I want to express my thoughts not those of others and I want to speak to God with respect for His leadership in my life as well as a respect for others.. Most importantly, praying for someone else should be asking

God to bless them not curse them.³⁰ God is in the business of being merciful. To ask anything else of Him is to ask Him to step outside His own character and be someone He is not. This is not possible.³¹

The Bible tells the story when the king of Moab commissioned a certain prophet Balaam to curse Israel, a nation God had blessed. It couldn't work because God would not be coerced, bribed or deceived into it.

God came to Balaam and asked, "Who are these men with you?"

Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: 'A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.'"

But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."³²

Paradise

There is a place for prayer for things I desire to have. We shouldn't lose sight of where the Bible tells us this all began—in the Garden of Eden, which, after the original meanings of the words, I call "The Paradise of Pleasure." Whether you understand our first parents as real and a part of our own personal ancestry or you view the story of Adam and Eve as metaphorical, it is the prologue of purest happiness in God's story of grace. It is having everything my way and somehow what I want brings pleasure equally to those around me and to God.

Eden no longer exists for us in this life. Satan, according to John Milton in his account of "Paradise Lost" was possessed of a raging jealousy that successfully plotted an

³⁰ Romans 12:14 bless and do not curse.

³¹ Psalms 100:5 For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

³² Numbers 22:9-12.

end to this happy scene. But this is not the end of the story because there is such a thing as prayer.

We have Jesus' promise:

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.³³

Whatever means—just that—whatever. However, I misrepresent the relationship if I seek to use God's kindness for my own ends. In Jesus' words, I am *asking* not telling.

Why Ask?

We have all kinds of reasons for asking God for things and some of these are not in our best interest.

Some believers occasionally have a need to provide reasonable explanations for their actions. They, consequently, assume some blessing from God is a validation of these actions. But answered prayer is not a proof of our spirituality. What God does for us does not reflect our goodness but His. For some people, answered prayer appears to be a measure of their spirituality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God's grace is just that, an unmerited *gift* of His love.

Some might even assume that faith is the reason we have what we have from God, but sometimes the reverse is true: Answered prayer supports, validates and emboldens our trust in God.

Sometimes we assume God did something He didn't do. Other times, we fail to observe clear expressions of His grace. God is providing out of sight of our understanding.

There is also this caveat: some things we shouldn't ask

³³ John 14:13.

for because they betray unwise choices that are more likely to harm rather than help.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.³⁴

The Apostle Paul also admitted the obvious, “*We know not what we should pray for as we ought.*”³⁵ Leaving my happiness solely up to me would be an unwise choice on my part. My requests are important to God, but He must stay in charge of my happiness and well-being. I should want my prayers to draw me closer to God. And when it comes to how He answers me to bless me, or heal me, or whatever result I might anticipate, I am not the best judge of this matter. He is!

His Pleasure

It isn't a matter of my pleasure only, but His also! God takes joy in loving us. One of the prophets taught:

The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love, he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.³⁶

And the Psalmist enjoined us:

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.³⁷

What is it I want? What is it I desire for myself? What is it I am asking for? If my thoughts can think of nothing but Him, my heart longs to meet with Him in prayer, my desire is to be with Him and have His presence always with me, then it is far more about Him than me!

Asking for things outside of an interest in this

³⁴ James 4:3.

³⁵ Romans 8:26.

³⁶ Zephaniah 3:17.

³⁷ Psalm 37:4.

relationship is a selfish act that misinterprets the revelation of prayer in Scripture. When selfish interests fail me, I become less likely to believe in the power of prayer. Not caring to know Him but only use Him leads to disproving the theology of answered prayer and leads many to give up on a reliance on His promises. And this is more than sad because the world is looking on and I, as a believer, am suppose to shine the spotlight on how personal my God is. I should be giving reasons to others why they should also seek Him out. It is reasonable, therefore, to expect God to be glorified in my life and answered prayer supports this truth.

There may be a need for some believers to revisit their understanding of the role prayer plays in their lives—a role upon which past generations of saints hung all their faith and hopes.

Saying Goodbye

This doesn't mean that it is wrong to occasionally pray for something just for me. My requests are just that: my desires, my wants. I can ask because, again, the important thing is that I am asking. I am talking to God about them.

On my leaving Buffalo for the unseen forests of Eastern Pennsylvania to begin training for ministry, I did ask God for one more meeting with a certain young lady of interest. I guess I wanted to say goodbye but surreptitiously, where I could smile her way with furtive glance and she alone would reflect on my sorrow. I let God know that this meant a lot to me, and had it not happened, I still would have kept my talks with God real. I would not have accused Him of unanswered prayer.

There was scheduled an event where she and I independently attended. But alas, it only drove the pain deeper into my grief stricken heart and left me with one more tearful memory.

Was it God? Did He answer?

Maybe!

Gizella

We are at times wanting to pray about things that are probably higher up on the scale of our concerns than God's. Still, talk to God about them. Let Him decide that. You'll know when your heart is at peace.

I was weeping before God for Gizella, a lady in her fifties. She was suffering with a kidney stone in her one remaining kidney. She was in the hospital while questions remained as to her prognosis. I thought she could die and I wanted God to intervene—an honorable cause. I was still up talking to the Lord about this well into the night. I was in tears. At 2 AM I sensed in my heart (a marked sense of peace) that she would be all right. It was as if God spoke to me, not in an audible way but—as Dr. Beuttler used to say, *“as clear as a bell and as sharp as a razor.”*³⁸ The thought triggered by that peace was, “Go to bed; she’s going to be all right!” I did and she was.

I Need a Job

Sometimes our needs seem to tie God's hands. He has to get us out of messes we probably shouldn't have gotten

³⁸ Dr. Beuttler also used the phrase “the words stood there in my consciousness.” He called this a “spiritual voice.”

into in the first place. Our plans probably should have been brought to His attention before we executed them! And maybe we should have taken wise counsel as to how to proceed with our interests. We sometimes need to wait on God, to learn to apply the breaks rather than speed away into our future.

When I attended college, on a particularly overcast afternoon, I took my customary stroll down the lane that is pictured on the cover. I had a serious interest in discussing things with God. It was the Spring of 1968 and the school year would be ending soon—a mere two months before my impending nuptials. I had no job, no place to make into a home for my bride and me and no license to drive a car (which for a guy was a serious threat to manhood). I owned nothing but the proverbial “shirt off my back” and a few books.

But the process has to begin with a job; so, it was time to walk the lane and get God’s attention. With my eyesight blurred over with tears, I began to voice (probably out loud since no one else was there) my panic and the urgency with our wedding seemingly hours away! I made no deals with God but I did tell Him I would be willing to go door to door in the small country town at the bottom of the hill begging for employment if that was what He thought appropriate. (Okay, I wasn’t serious about this but I was desperate and God knew.) And aside from an abiding peacefulness within me, I heard no voices, interpreted no sudden breeze, saw no vision, came to no conclusions, nor had I the oracle’s prophecy of what was about to happen when I returned to campus.

To begin this story, it was during the school year when I was working with the yearbook staff, or I was part of the

yearbook staff. I worked with the faculty advisor and Don, the Editor in Chief. Don was graduating and I was to assume his position in my senior year. I mention Don because I met him in front of the administration building when I returned. He offered me a position working at Longacre's³⁹, famous for their poultry products including chicken and turkey rolls, turkey salami, and chicken salad. Their products can still be purchased in many supermarkets at the meat counter as cold-cuts for sandwiches.

There is a context to all of this worth sharing. This was the final year Longacre's would allow employees to solicit additional help. The following year would begin the work of an overly organized HR department that took this privilege away from the students and gave it to the newspapers. Additionally, the motto "a friend of Don is a friend of Longacre" was replaced with employment applications and interviews. Following this paper and interview process would have made it impossible for me to maintain the tight schedule with the wedding approaching.

Don told me I could start on the morrow, earning \$2.15 an hour (incidentally the highest paying job locally for students at the time). It was a Thursday. I asked if I could start Monday instead, which I did. (I can imagine—not actually—God exclaiming "You got to be kidding me, Mr.

³⁹ Horace bought an 84-acre farm near Quakertown. He purchased a used truck, and began selling eggs and vegetables and then added dressed hens. The enterprise evolved into a large poultry business, Horace W. Longacre Inc. and Longacre Poultry Markets. The two divisions had at their height more than 700 employees. The divisions merged with Wampler Foods in 1984 and the Longacres sold their interest in 1992. See http://articles.mcall.com/2009-05-27/news/4380095_1_board-chairperson-horace-member

Desperate-I-need-a-job-right-now!")

Obviously, fifty years hence, we made it. The rest of the story took shape detail by detail.

So, did God answer prayer!?

I never did become the Editor-in-Chief of the college yearbook. [Long story.] Don knew me, but how many other students whom he knew needed employment? And I never told him that I needed a job ...much less about my impending marriage! Actually, I had no relationship with Don. He seldom took leadership with the yearbook having left me completely in charge. Why did he pick me? We could continue to piece together maybes which only would point to the providential oversight that God, I believed, exercised in this case. Did Don think of me because he "ran into me" while on a walk!? The only question worth asking here is: did God answer prayer?

I believe God did!

His Immanence

I am comfortable maintaining that God was somehow involved, which is what the phrase "the immanence of God" is all about. Participation in that "immanence" by us is simply a matter of conversing with Him over our needs and wants and interests and passions.

Father Donovan in his work "*Christianity Rediscovered*" correctly cautions us against a very common pagan understanding about prayer⁴⁰ that God is there to perform miracles only, if and when He wishes, and the rest of the

⁴⁰ "...it is not that the laws of the universe are being suspended, but that creation is open ended and continuing." - Donovan Vincent J., *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978). pp. 37 & 102.

time He is distant, uninvolved. Father Donovan contrasted this notion with the Biblical message:

“... [The True God is] ... a God of creation who exists in [among] and with the things He brought into being. Creation is the key part of revelation.”

In simple terms: Our God never left but remains with us continuously creating, at work responding to our communion with Him. The Apostle Paul had a rather poetic way of saying this:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.⁴¹

To interpret Paul, “When we talk to God with an open mind and honest heart, God has His opportunity to develop our relationship with Him. Something beautiful will be happening to us when we desire and have deep communion with Him. We are becoming more and more like Him in our thoughts and desires.”

Prayer is God’s opportunity to create again, to conform us into His image, to make us more like Himself. And each answer to prayer is an extension of this creative work. His creative work in us is the result of that ongoing conversation we have with the God Who walks beside or as Jesus promised,

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.⁴²

Booth's Algorithm

I cannot forget one answer to prayer that proves to me God’s involvement in the littler things that concern us. It is worth a section to repeat something I wrote about twice: once in “*Can You See God in This Picture*” and again in “*I*

⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

⁴² Matthew 28:20.

Remember." I will try here to add details that hopefully will tell you why this moment was so miraculous, not as a suspension of the laws of science nor even as a spiritual experience in which one "feels" God, but in evidence of His caring presence.

I returned to the lab at Framingham State College where I was finishing a degree in computer science. It was on a Saturday because I was checking on our "project" before Monday when the professor would get her hands on it and a grade would be registered. I felt I deserved an A!

I was working with a fellow student, who unbeknown to me had already been there and who had somehow "rearranged" the wiring to give our project a neater look. He got one wire wrong, which I would soon discover. [But the truth is more desperate than that. I didn't know it was just one wire. There were dozens of wires, various colors, connecting a number of computer chips.]

This project was a circuit (on a much smaller scale, of course) that could simulate Booth's algorithm for multiplying and dividing. Booth's approach has also been called "Arabian math" and is the way a computer multiplies and divides using binary math.

Here is a paragraph from "*Can You See God in This Picture.*" For me, it is as close to a diary entry as I can get.

When I came to the lab that Saturday, the board looked great but it didn't work when I tested it. It couldn't even multiply two times two. And I didn't have a clue why. How was I going to test hundreds of connections with a voltmeter this late in the game? My anxiety kicked in big time and what made matters worse, I needed new glasses. I needed to bend over the board with a magnifying glass a few inches away just to check connections.

I panicked. I cannot describe the fear that rippled through my chest. I couldn't see my way clearly to a plan that I could execute in the next few minutes to find the problem. Whatever I did would have to be "needle-in-a-

haystack” logic. On an anxiety scale of one to ten—a ten being the day, years later, that the doctor told me I had cancer—this was at least a nine and a half.

How do I describe this moment? A feeling of anguishing hopelessness overwhelmed my faith in humanity and higher education. My college career was heading high speed into a wall. I had been on tract to graduate “summa cum laude” [Oh! I did.] and I was beginning to relax about being back there at age 50 and then this happened. In this moment I was crashing. As my “dairy” read:

I stepped back yelling, “No! No!”

I began to pray, to beg God (I do mean “beg”)—to help me. This was no polished prayer to the Almighty or Father of lights or The Great God of Love, notwithstanding He is all this and more. I didn’t appeal to any theology or to His divine attributes or to His nature. I yelled out for His help. I had no clue how to fix this thing but fix it I must.

I kept asking God for help while shaking all over. I wondered how I could reach my partner whose phone number I did not have. It was too late. Monday was due day.

As I continued to breathe our Lord’s name in a painful cry of despair, I had presence of mind to grab a volt meter and started to check the voltage drops across a couple connections. There were countless connections to check, when my eye fell on one orange wire and my gut said, “I want to check this one.” The link was dead but it shouldn’t have been!. That was it.. I reconnected that orange wire where it belonged and the circuit worked. Fixed! Thank God!

I cannot for even a nano second entertain the assumption that this was not an answer to prayer. I maintain

unreservedly that God heard and answered my agonizing prayer for His help.

The Smallest Thing

It was somewhere in 1999 ...ish. I sat at my computer attempting to work but finding it impossible because of a severe headache. I was informed later by an orthopedic doctor that I may have had a pinched nerve (a cervicogenic headache[?]. I don't speak doc-eze!) that was probably the result of the way I slept or watched TV. Later I would have physical therapy to correct this but for now my right temple was throbbing to the drumbeat of my body at war. How I must have mistreated it! It mattered not that I did this to myself by not practicing correct posture. The persistent pain and my discomfort exceeded my tolerance for it and I began to call out for Jesus to be merciful. I was not swearing; I was praying. My fists were clinched in sympathy. My jaws quivered while the muscles of my face locked them in a tightening grip of agony, I begged Jesus to do something. And then suddenly, without any notice, I sneezed one violent, head whipping sneeze. My head was thrown forward. Tethered to my neck it snapped back. The pain was immediately cut in half to a bearable level and soon ceased. [I had not taken any pain medication at the time.] That was for me an answer to prayer! This is such a small "miracle" it probably doesn't qualify for my attention, but the timing with my plea for God's help should not go unnoticed.

Learning to trust God in the small things, prepares us to trust Him in the big. It is best to find Him faithful in the smallest thing; so, that we will look for Him when the

John King

bigger challenges to our faith come along. That “big” thing, perhaps, for me was yet to come when I would be diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer.

Always On My Mind

David's happiness, his sense of connection with his own history, his contentment in his current situation, and his confidence regarding future challenges was indissolubly linked to His love for the Torah, the first five books of our bible.⁴³ Elsewhere he referred to these same teachings as a flashlight lighting his footpath not only telling him where to walk or how to live but keeping his focus from wandering.

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who **meditates**⁴⁴ on his law day and night.
— Psalms 1:1-2

David discovered this principle when he discovered the value of meditating on God's Word. David enjoyed musing over, according to the Torah, what God had done:

I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.⁴⁵

Meditation—to be candid—is a form of “talking to oneself.”⁴⁶ In the context of prayer, it is a kind-of reminiscing or pondering about something read in the Bible. Charles Spurgeon explained,

“To read it by day and think about it by night. In the day of his prosperity he sings Psalms out of the Word of God, and in the night of his affliction he comforts himself with promises out of the same

⁴³ Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

⁴⁴ soliloquizes, muses as in Psalms 63: “On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.”

⁴⁵ Psalms 77:12

⁴⁶ The Hebrew word הַהִיָּיָהּ represents a low sound, a growl or chant or to murmur as one does when they are musing over something.

book.⁴⁷

Hezekiah's Letter

Meditation can be a form of prayer if we invite God to eavesdrop on our musings or if we find ourselves on occasion looking up and inviting God to take notice. When the Assyrian army besieged the city of Jerusalem, Hezekiah, the king of Judah, received a discouraging letter demanding his unconditional surrender. So, he brought the matter to God's attention:

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD, "LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, ... you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib [the Assyrian king] has sent to ridicule the living God. ... Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God."⁴⁸

Hezekiah seemed more concerned for God's reputation than his own life.

"How dare a lowly foreign tyrant think himself above the Almighty, the King over all other kingdoms!" the king mused!

The king's words did not fall on deaf ears because it became disastrously evident the following morning in the enemy encampment that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. A plague broke out and 85,000 soldiers were sick and dying. They had to withdraw.⁴⁹

Most assuredly, people do talk to themselves! The

⁴⁷ Spurgeon C.H. *The Treasury of David: An Expository and Devotional Commentary on the Psalms*. (Scripture Truth Book Company: Fincastle, VA. 1984), Vol I. p 2.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 37:14-20

⁴⁹ Isaiah 37:36 Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!

statistics are doubtlessly incomplete because most people, if they are not searching for acceptable expletives after bumping their head on a overhead cabinet, tend to keep most of such conversations ...well, to themselves.

Having been a pastor, I recommend all believers learn to preach and deliver homilies to themselves! Ever since the early days when I knew I wanted to teach God's Word, I would practice on myself in the privacy of my own bedroom or on quiet walks to anywhere. Now I have a lot to say to me while soaking in a hot bath.

In case this sounds silly, consider the benefit of thinking through things that matter to you whether you verbalize your thoughts out loud or just in your head. When you are worrying, let your thoughts wander toward the possibility that this might be something worth "spreading before the Lord." And it is never a silly idea to ask God if He hears your thoughts and if He has a way out you haven't thought of. It is never a silly idea to encourage yourself by recalling God's promises or rereading Bible stories in which God answered prayer or guided someone past a difficult situation. Such accounts are not just the record of what God did for others; they are the creative history of what God does for His children—for you and me. Meditation on God's Word has great value in the context of a prayer life that looks to Him for help.⁵⁰

Dr. Beuttler, one of my professors in Bible college tells of the time he needed money for food and his wallet was as empty as the pantry. Dr. Beuttler went aside and while alone with God he opened his empty wallet and lifting it to the sky invited God to take a look. He "spread it out

⁵⁰ Psalms 121:1-2 I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD

before the Lord.” When he retrieved the mail later that evening, he found an envelope among the pieces with funds enough to feed his family for the week. The money didn’t magically appear, but God wanted the Beuttlers to know that there was a connection between the gift and God’s generous heart and answered prayer.

Devoted to You

Meditating on God’s Word, as David probably understood it, is a lost commitment in a modern world. Seminary students, who are supposedly the cream of the crop in Bible scholarship now interpret scripture using something called the “historical-critical” method. I wrote at length about this in *“Challenged: Living Our Faith in a Post Modern Age.”* I mention this here because this approach to interpreting and studying the Bible is contrasted with the “devotional” method used by pastors from the beginning of Christianity. With the devotional method of reading the Bible, we have always considered first and foremost that the Bible was indeed from God. When I went to school for the Bible, we were taught that every word of this Book was inspired by God.⁵¹ It is the Bible that self-testifies of the plan of God on Calvary for the salvation of mankind.⁵² If God didn’t produce the Bible, then it has to be just another book, a work of literature, and the plan of Salvation evolved out of some ancient religious meme, which is how the historical-critical method views it. (Incidentally, in “Challenged” I show that there is no evolutionary path

⁵¹ 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

⁵² I guess we should write person kind.

from ancient religious thought to the Cross. The “Cross of Christ” is indeed God’s idea and His alone!)

God 's Word

Meditation is a meaningless idea if the Bible is not God’s Word. But if God did oversee the publication of the Bible—may I say it this way—why do we not have the original copy? Scholarship has discovered that before the printing press, hand copies of the Bible differed from each other and many of these differences were the result of edits made by the copyists sometimes based on their own view of things, sometimes merely on human error. But—and here is the important thing to recognize—God’s intention for this book, our need for God and the historical record that shows that need, and God’s provision through Jesus—these—are not lost in the transcriptions. Meditating on what is read in the Bible can be just as important for us as it was for David to meditate on the Torah because it *is* the Word of God.

But why do we not have the original copy of the Bible? Over the centuries, too many hands went into writing and compiling the Bible, but this, too, is, no doubt in my mind, by God’s design because religious people have a tendency to worship “originals” as sacred relics. The Bible records the story of the Israelites, on their way from Egypt to Palestine, coming across poisonous snakes. Many were bit and God told Moses to make a replica of the snake raised on a pole for them to view if they want to survive.⁵³

⁵³ Numbers 21_8-9 The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole.

Christians believe that God had Jesus' death on His mind when he had Moses make a bronze replica of this animal and erect it on a pole.⁵⁴ The bronze serpent was called in Hebrew the "Nehushtan" and I was not surprised to read that centuries later it was still around and they were burning incense to it. (The, then, King, Josiah, because He wanted to get back to worshipping God, had it destroyed.⁵⁵) I think religious people would treat the Bible, too, as a relic more important than the text within it if we had the originals. (Think of the value placed on the original edition of famous authors.) We learned a word for this: bibliolatry, i.e. worshipping the Bible.

David *meditated* on the Word of God. He worshipped *God*.

Nothing Magical

Recitative, a word or sound repeated to aid concentration or meditation is not chanting. When we meditate on God's Word we are thinking about it or puzzling over it or studying it. We might be bemused or surprised to read something we did not know was written. We might be overjoyed to read about a little known promise. We might be wondering what our pastor or the church on the corner thinks about this or that in the Bible but the point is that we are thinking about it. Meditation is, therefore, not rote memorization or intoning a verse of the Bible. Chanting

⁵⁴ Jesus is not represented in the snake. The Christian reference is to John 12:32 "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

⁵⁵ 2 Kings 18:4 He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan)

mimics words without forethought as to its meaning or significance, whereas, meditation reflects deeply on what it must mean.

There is no magic in words, even though religious souls want to believe so. We all, probably at one time or another, have been enjoined to say prayers others have written hoping that the words that they wrote might have the ability to move God more so than our own. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God wants *you* to say it in your own words from your own heart.⁵⁶ Father Donovan as a missionary in East Africa to the Masai people confessed, “*There is probably only one formal prayer I would ever teach them—The Our Father*⁵⁷ [The Lord’s Prayer].” Even “*Our Father which art in Heaven...*” is less about the words and more about the meaning. Father Donovan then added, “*Gratitude had to be the background...teaching them how to pray.*”

Is there, as the song says, “*power in the name of Jesus*”?⁵⁸ Well, yes and no.

Yes because “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*”⁵⁹ It is reasonable to say that to accept salvation, one has to know where it comes from and who provided it. Salvation comes from God in the person of His son, Jesus.

Yes because “*In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you,*” Jesus instructed His disciples, “*my*

⁵⁶ As used in Isaiah 59:13 A soliloquy, an uttering out of heart. see The BDB Hebrew Lexicon. Sixteenth Edition. Hendrickson Publishing: Peabody, MA 2015 p 211.

⁵⁷ Father Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) p. 103.

⁵⁸ “Break Every Chain” by Tasha Cobbs.

⁵⁹ Acts 4:12.

Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."⁶⁰ It should be obvious that Jesus was referring to His role or ministry in answering prayer and not some magic in the word, "Jesus." The magic, if I can keep this word, is when we call on Him and Jesus is His name. Understanding Jesus' part in answered prayer is important and mentioning His name in prayer underscores that importance. It is the heart and not just the voice that needs to know this!

So, No! ...because Jesus' name is not part of an incantation or a yoga mantra. He is the one who intercedes for us with God, the Father.⁶¹ So praying to Him is encouraged. But using His name as the password into God's presence, our "Abracadabra," without caring to know what this all might mean—and without a desire to follow this same Jesus—is to me an example of vain repetition.⁶²

Repeating one's self in prayer is not in and of itself vain or useless, There is nothing wrong with telling God over and over again if this is our heart. Those who say pray once and then forget about it because God heard and asking Him again is unnecessary are so, so wrong!

The Apostle Peter correctly observed from his own experience that you should "*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*"⁶³ But praying once only about our anxieties and the things we worry about only works if we

⁶⁰ John 16:23.

⁶¹ Hebrews 7:25; 8:1 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.... Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,

⁶² Matthew 6:7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

⁶³ I Peter 5:7.

stop worrying—but whose kidding who! When God’s peace in our heart changes the subject—yes!—change the conversation with Him. But when I am still concerned, I am still praying; I am repeating myself over again in prayer, not because I think God is negligent or that He was not listening the first time. I keep praying because it is still on my heart.

Let Me Pray

Is meditation on the Word of God, the Bible, a form of praying?

Yes. Pastors are often going to prayer with a study Bible in hand not because they want to argue with the Author but because studying the Bible is a form of what we might call “prayerful meditation.”

Verses that trouble us are worth talking over with God. During my first year at Bible College I recall growing increasingly anxious about two verses in the Bible that seemingly contradict each other. Back then we debated what was affectionately known as the Wesleyan-Calvin Controversy.⁶⁴ John (and Charles) Wesley, who started the Methodist church felt that persons once dedicated to serving God and following the Bible could change their mind after a while and become—we have a word for this—“*apostate*.” John Calvin, from whose teachings Baptist doctrine derives, thought this impossible. This is not the place for such a discussion, but on reading Philippians I came across these two verses together.

⁶⁴ see Robert Shank, “*Life in the Son: A study of the doctrine of perseverance*” (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, MN) 1960. (I found this work offensive and divisive. There is a more unifying approach to interpreting scripture.)

...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God ⁶⁵who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

If my relationship with God is my responsibility, which is what the first part says (work it!), how could it be God's ("*God who works*")? In my innocence I thought the Bible would be clearer. I was facing my first glimpse at what many might call a blatant contradiction. I had a lot to learn about the paradox that is real life. Wesley would have loved the first part, Calvin the second, and I began to wonder if either ever read the entire sentence as one idea. I was actually panicky because this book was to be my life!

I had to bring my concerns to God in prayer pleading for some resolution that kept the unity of the Bible and confirmed my understanding that He, God, was, indeed, behind its publication. I was desperate to maintain that God was the Author of the Bible! My meditation was becoming an obsession. My love for His Word was hurting. I was never a debater who could keep turning an idea around until it fit the hole I thought it should drop into. I was never one to shape the puzzle piece, with a scissor, to force it in a place where I thought it looked best. I didn't want to invent an interpretation or see the meaning as symbolic or hope to find an uncommon definition for the word "*work*." Ockham's razor⁶⁶ (the simplest explanation) was always my first hermeneutical choice (i.e. rule for interpreting Scripture). But what might that be here!?

I was actually frightened that this was the end of the

⁶⁵ Philippians 2:12-13

⁶⁶ Latin: *lex parsimoniae* "law of parsimony") is a problem-solving principle that, when presented with competing hypothetical answers to a problem, one should select the one that makes the fewest assumptions.

spiritual road, the yellow bricks led to a dead end. You have to understand that in my mind, my studies of the Bible had to prove its authenticity ...just had to! Or I made a mistake in leaving a degree program in Chemistry to become—what?—an English Lit. teacher? The Bible had to be the Word of God and it had to be that naturally without being forced into some theological mold. It had to read like the story of grace that I believed—and still believe—it is. God knew my despondency and suddenly a thought popped into my head, a light went on, and my heart was at peace. I had the meaning.

My life is a joint work between God and me. And I have discovered over the decades since how dynamic a truth this really is. We co-operate with the work of God. He puts it in us. We work it out, express it and live it out in our behavior. I have since understood the Apostle Paul's comment to the church at Rome:

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.⁶⁷

The believer's hope of living the christian life rests in this truth that the love they show toward others is something God first gifted them. In the movie *"Chariots of Fire"* Sam Mussabini, played by Ian Holm, encourages Harold Abrams, played by Ben Cross, in his training for the 1924 Olympics to develop his potential as a runner. Mr. Mussabini could find Mr. Abrams 2 more steps (more speed). He argued favorably.: *"You cannot get out what God has not put in."* Eric Liddell played by Ian Charleson saw his own role in the Olympics saying, *"God made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure."* The Biblical apostle said the

⁶⁷ Romans 5:5

same thing regarding all of us. *“Work out what God has put in.”*

John, the apostle, said it this way:

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.⁶⁸

I slept good that night.

I Have A Song

God also enjoys our celebrating His goodness toward us in song. This, of course, is only true when we really mean the words we sing. Giving thanks to God and singing go together in the Bible. The Psalmist exclaimed,

I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving.⁶⁹

Listening to praise and worship choruses while being drawn to the words as though they were our own thoughts and feelings expressed in song counts as a very real and important part of a conversation with the Lord. Prayer and thanksgiving are synonyms⁷⁰ in the Bible. Singing in worship, thanking God for His goodness towards us, is clearly a form of talking to God. It has the further benefit of giving us a more hopeful perspective on our situations whenever we talk them over with God. The Apostle Paul encourages us,

⁶⁸ John 3:27.

⁶⁹ Psalms 69:30. Isaiah, as well, spoke of the two together: “...thanksgiving and the sound of singing.” - Isaiah 51:3. And Nehemiah 12:46 spoke of “the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.”

⁷⁰ I Timothy 2:1 I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.

“...thanksgiving’ (Philippians 4:6), a somewhat rare word elsewhere, is frequent in sacred Greek.... Regarded as one manner of prayer, it expresses that which ought never to be absent from any of our devotions (Phil. 4:6; Ephesians. 5:20; 1 Thessalonians. 5:18; 1 Timothy. 2:1); namely, the grateful acknowledgment of past mercies, as distinguished from the earnest seeking of future.” - Trench, Richard C. *On the Study of the Words Lectures. Page 29ff*

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.⁷¹

And for those who need confirmation, musical instruments are a great addition (although acapella praise is inspiring), as well the ancients could attest:

Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.⁷²

Worship inspires hope and encourages us to wait on the Lord for His help. Dogma alone in a time of trouble will prove inadequate to impress upon us this truth. I am not saying that dogma or doctrine or teachings are unimportant. They are! And I would encourage you to meditate on them thru scripture. And God can speak to us through the teachings but, in general, praising and thanking God for His mercy, or words that encourage us to wait on the Lord, are words spoken to the heart not head. And one conveyance every bit inspiring is the uplifting tones of the appropriate musical score and arrangement.

With all due respect to the church's teaching, questions of the finer points of church doctrine do not usually make it into song. Over the years I have observed believers worshipping God in song where the words clearly did not represent the theology or doctrine of the church they were in. What has always been important with the words is celebrating God's merciful goodness.

Worship in song and hymn recharges our faith because its focus is not on doctrinal differences but on—yes, sometimes in poetic form—the commonality of our faith and hope in Christ. Songs are not intended as a teaching tool—other than the message of the Cross—but an

⁷¹ Philippians 4:6

⁷² Psalms 147:7

encouragement for the heart.⁷³ In this form, choruses and hymns give us a vehicle for expressing our desire to love and serve God. We worship Him through song and such worship is, thus, a form of prayer.⁷⁴

Real Christian music transports the believer to a higher plane where the soul loses its awareness of natural surroundings, where the spirit begins to sense that the ground beneath is holy and nothing is more real in that moment than God. True praise music carries the believer to a place of longing for the Lord's closeness while all other desires seem to disappear.

Treasures

Meditation is the normal flow of our thoughts over concerns and things important to us. When something is on our mind it becomes our conversation, if not out loud to others, in private to ourselves. Meditation is the natural expression of the treasures of the heart.

Meditating on Bible verses in God's Word, is a sign that we treasure those verses. And this encourages us to make those truths part of our life. The Lord had a message for Joshua who lead Israel into the Promised Land of Palestine:

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do⁷⁵ everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Said another way: our thoughts tend to dominate our

⁷³ Colossians 3:16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

⁷⁴ Ephesians 5:19 speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.

⁷⁵ Joshua 1:8.

actions. These thoughts originate in our hearts. Jesus taught that

...the mouth speaks what the heart is full of...⁷⁶

How much do we, as believers, treasure God's Word?

How much do we think of Him. David testified:

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.⁷⁷ Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

Isaiah confessed to the Lord, *"My soul yearns for you in the night."*⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Matthew 12:34.

⁷⁷ Psalms 63:6-7.

⁷⁸ Isaiah 26:9.

A Far Better Thing

“Saving Private Ryan” was a 1998 movie about Captain John Miller during WW2, whose mission was to find a certain private named James Ryan and bring him home alive. Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, was not commissioned to lead a battalion into battle or to do any one of a thousand tasks that would help diminish the enemy’s ability to wage war—as noteworthy and important as that would be. His task was to retrieve private Ryan ... alive. Elements of this story are reminiscent, no doubt, of many personal war stories but I mention it here because this movie in a general way may represent what is expected of us.

We all want to think that our achievements, our successes, our contribution to life, will be historically significant but maybe we are here to contribute to another’s story. We are members of the supporting cast. We are here to give them the chance to do something great. Maybe, what we do out of love is behind the scenes. We are the hands that raise the curtain on another’s performance. We light the stage of another person in the spotlight. Could we imagine that, in christian terms, sometimes, the greatest contribution a believer could make to their world is made in a private meeting with God for someone else? Is it possible that God has called on us to be praying for someone else’s chance at greatness?

Moses

There is a story in the Bible of Israel at war with a neighboring nation. Moses was Israel’s leader at the time.

He was advanced in years, nearing one hundred. During this battle he needed help from a couple friends, one whose name, Hur, seldom appears in the chronicle of their history. According to the Bible story: As long as the military could see Moses' hands held high, they were emboldened and charged forward putting the enemy to flight. However, when Moses' arms tired and he dropped them, the enemy began to prevail. Then we read:

When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, ⁷⁹one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.

Both Aaron, Moses' brother, and Hur were the supporting cast to an historically significant leader who would become the founder of the Judeo-Christian tradition upon which both Judaism and the Christian faith are built. Would God ever call you and me to be a "Hur" for some Moses who would be venerated while we faded into obscurity?

David

The Bible tells the account of David, before he was king of Israel, when his family was kidnapped by a band of men who were at war with Israel.⁸⁰ David and his men went after them and "*David recovered all.*"⁸¹ But there was controversy. Two hundred of his men were exhausted and stayed back to guard the supplies. This didn't set well with some who thought they shouldn't share in the plunder they brought back after putting the enemy to flight. They

⁷⁹ Exodus 17:12.

⁸⁰ I Samuel 30:3 When David and his men reached Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive.

⁸¹ I Samuel 30:19.

argued,

Because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder we recovered.⁸²

But David wisely held his ground as leader:

The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike.⁸³

I am reminded of a famous line from John Milton's Sonnet 19: "*They also serve who only stand and waite.*" Are not these the believers whose sole mission has been praying for the successes of others? They also serve who only stay back and pray while others retrieve the accolades of victory.

The Greatest

If we are persons of action or great dreamers, this might sound as if we are selling ourselves woefully short but there are times when there is a private Ryan, an individual whom we might be asked to "rescue" through our interceding for them in prayer. Prayer gives God His opportunity. When the Apostle Peter was imprisoned for his faith, a group of friends were praying at Mary's house for his release.⁸⁴ Surprisingly, they seemed astonished almost in disbelief when he showed up at the front door⁸⁵ of her home.

Here is the best explanation of Jesus' maxim for following His example: "*The greatest among you will be your*

⁸² I Samuel 30:22.

⁸³ I Samuel 30:24.

⁸⁴ Acts 12:5 o Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁸⁵ Acts 12:14-15 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

servant."⁸⁶

In the quiet of our "secret" place we can pray for others and let God move into action on their behalf though we may never be noticed for the part we played when God answers.

Afraid to Pray

Not only is praying for another the most important, but the most intensive and demanding thing you or I will ever do.

We can empathize with some who are not emotionally or mentally prepared to—as we often say—"*wage spiritual warfare on their knees.*"

Father Donovan observed the lack of prayer among the civilized peoples of the world.⁸⁷ He concluded that perhaps it was from fear that they were reluctant to involve God in the affairs of life. But what might they have to fear? Afraid their involvement in another's fortune—for good or bad—would be too tasking on them, too time consuming, too burdensome?

The Apostle Paul encouraged us to applaud those who are the happiest. And he asked us to shed a tear with someone who is sorrowful.⁸⁸ But if we are jealous or envious, this isn't going to happen, neither are we going to promote them in prayer.

Perhaps, we don't really want God to intervene, like Jonah not wanting God to accept Nineveh's repentance. Jonah hated this city and wanted God to wipe it off the

⁸⁶ Matthew 23:11

⁸⁷ Donovan Vincent J., *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) p. 102.

⁸⁸ Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

map instead of forgiving them. But alas, poor Jonah, God is forgiving. That's His thing. That's what He did at Calvary for all of us. Perhaps, before we can pray, we need to learn to forgive!

The song "Took It All Away" by Crossway and written by Annie McRae poetically depicts a paralysis of a prayer life because of personal misfortune—and I get this.

I've been numb from the shock of devastation
Left so confused that it paralyzed my prayers
An unexpected pain tore my heart to pieces
And just left my faith hanging there.⁸⁹

Or perhaps we cannot find the words to pray. It is as if by praying we are being asked to give God advice how He should proceed and we are without words to even explain how we feel. We have a tolerance level for carrying another's burdens. Their anguish may exceed any weak empathy we seem to show. Or all we want to do is cry with them.

Even the best of us can become immune to catastrophe. Even the best of us may want to insulate ourselves from an anguish which we cannot do anything about. We were not trained for what we might call the worse of the worse. We don't know what to say, let alone what to do! Our loss for words somehow translates into a lack of prayer.

Some disasters turn survival into a personal endeavor while we—metaphorically speaking—step on others in our flight rushing for the door. Our own woes take precedence.

But why not tell God all this!? Why not share with Him our dismay? It is not heartlessness that we are feeling, but

⁸⁹ "TOOK IT ALL AWAY" Made popular by Crossway from the album: Beautiful Thing
Annie McRae, Christian Taylor Music

an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Why not let God hear you say in private that this is how you feel? It is not hypocrisy to have reasons why you are unlikely to pray for someone. We shouldn't let others make us think that it is.

God wants the real you. God shouldn't hear excuses. This is a needless exercise in deception because God already knows your heart and your thoughts. Adam and Eve, the first Bible story goes, ate the forbidden fruit and in their guilt they tried to avoid God rather than run to Him asking for forgiveness. Why be like Adam and Eve looking for large fig leaves to hide our spiritual and emotional nakedness and then try to hide from Him? Being totally open with God as to how we feel and where life hurts is always best. And, for my part, I don't want to hide from Him. I bow to His wisdom, always. I don't presume to know how He will respond but I speak my own mind in prayer—as I should!

Shock And Awe

My mom used to pray that God would use any means possible to bring her children to the revelation of His love and Who He is. If it took disaster, let disaster come. Perhaps, sometimes it takes shock and awe to get someone to look up. Even Paul the Apostle recommended to Timothy, his co-worker, who was pastoring a church at the time, that some people need to be taught a lesson and Satan makes the best teacher in some cases.⁹⁰

Speaking of Paul, God got his attention by blinding him for just three days. The results in Paul's life even shocked

⁹⁰ I Timothy 1:20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

the Christian world of that time.⁹¹

I only mention this to point out that the way to answers when we involve God may take an uncharted course to the destination. When we dare to ask God for more patience, for example—as noble an aspiration as this is—the Apostle Paul cautions us of a caveat: “*We know that suffering produces perseverance⁹² (patience).*” In military terms: a challenging boot camp makes a good soldier.

I never pray for such severe solutions for many reasons. To use another metaphor: I am not the surgeon; so, I do not know whether or not such aggressive surgery is required. I cannot tell God His business, to say that so-in-so needs to be “taught a lesson.”

I get no pleasure out of another’s suffering. I cannot understand how anyone could. Wanting to unleash the power of God in prayer, by inviting Him to do something that causes another pain, is not the reason for prayer. Trying to enlist God’s services to pain someone else in retaliation for pain they caused us is just wrong. Asking God to do anything in the name of “tough love” is to presume we know better than the gentler and more merciful love of God. We can register our complaints with Him but let Him work His wisdom His way in our relationships.

As Dr. Keener wrote:

Although we may expect that God is fully consistent..., we experience Him on the human level as an exciting God of surprises.”⁹³

* * *

⁹¹ Acts 9:13 “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

⁹² Romans 5:3

⁹³ Keener, Craig S. *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecostal*. (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 2016) p 204.

Classmates

There are those times when I want to pray for someone. I might even be tearful. I may not have the words but God knows that. And within the limit of my understanding, I share with His great heart the sum of the matter—as seen through my eyes. I sometimes just repeat myself a dozen times over because it “feels” right, it is what I want to do and how I want to express my heart. And I know God is listening.

When in high school I used to pray for my classmates this way on a number of occasions. I didn’t know anything about their lives but I could guess—being one of them. I spent considerable time lying in bed watering my pillow with tears while the thought of God hearing me flooded my heart with peace.

Snook

Solomon wisely advised us to invest in the lives of others. He had a poetic way of saying it.⁹⁴

Cast ⁹⁵thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Another translation explains:

Ship ⁹⁶your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.

Praying for others is metaphorically like throwing a small piece of bread in the river and somewhere down stream a small fish feeds on the “gift”.

Pastor Snook relates the following account in which he

⁹⁴ Ecclesiastes 11:1

⁹⁵ KJV - King James Version

⁹⁶ NIV - the translation used throughout this work when not otherwise specified.

became the recipient of the prayer of a believer whose name was never shared with us. But her praying is the reason for telling the story here. Pastor Snook begins: *“One Sunday God spoke to my heart: ‘I want you to build a church.’”*⁹⁷

He started building a church in Rutland, Vermont in October. He confessed:

My agnostic neighbor came ..to inform me..., “Nobody starts building here in October.”

I...replied,“It won’t snow until I get this roof shingled.”

“Wow, God,” I whispered, “I hope I didn’t put you on the spot.” I sensed He was not displeased.

It was the middle of February...when I nailed on the last shingle... [and] the first snow of the season started to fall.

A Vermont winter must have been embarrassed to allow this church to go up and vengefully plotted its destruction.

The temperature outside was thirty-five degrees below freezing and the foundation was cracking the full length of the building about four feet from the floor. I could hear it and I could see the walls bulging inward on both sides. ... The walls had buckled an entire foot. I called the concrete man and he confirmed my⁹⁹ fears the foundation could give way and the entire building be lost.

But God had a purpose for this church; so, it was time for someone to pray.

God...awakened a woman 150 miles away to pray for me. She knew nothing about my problem but she prayed ... for two and a half hours until her burden lifted. ..When I went back to work three days later... I ran down to the basement. The buckling I had seen ...had disappeared except for six inches of cracks in one corner. I stood ... and wept my ..thanksgiving.

Reachable Grace

A small group of us were participating in an all night prayer meeting that went only to three AM. We assembled

⁹⁷ Harry M Snook, *God’s Plan and Purpose For Your Life*. (Self-published: Vineland, N.J.: 1989) 34.

⁹⁸ *ibid.* 37.

⁹⁹ *ibid.* 47.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* 48.

in the living room of the home of one of our number and took turns praying where we sat or kneeled as the night rolled into morning. It was somewhere probably around one AM (but there is no way I could be sure since I was praying and had no sense of the time until we said that final amen) when I began to allow the silent tears to wet my cheeks as the name of a former church member was suddenly—and I might add, surprisingly—on my mind and heart.

I attempted thru deep breathing and directing my mind unto other persons to abort my heart's interest in someone who years before had left the church. She had since divorced and remarried a man who himself had to divorce his wife to marry her. They were high-school sweethearts, rumor had it, and this seemed to them a justifiable thing to do. Rumor also had it that she was into the occult (verification of which I never pursued). But my theology told me she was unreachable because she had turned apostate after having once embraced biblical truth.

The problem now was that I was weeping on her behalf and part of me felt that this was the right thing to do even though my head was trying to dissuade me. I melted into prayer for God to reach her somehow and not think her beyond the extent of His grace and love. It felt good to pray such a prayer but my emotions were in a debate with my thoughts until the Lord spoke to me.

By now in this writing, you must know how God speaks to me—not with any audible voice.

I cannot now quote the thought that burst forth from a heart now overwhelmed with care for this former parishioner. (I may have met her once but I cannot recall.) But in a stern and undebatable tone God said, "Don't ever

again underestimate my grace!!” God’s love is stronger than mine. I became convinced God wanted me to pray for her.

Leave Me Alone

The Story of God in our Bible does not read like a book of theology. Rather the God of Israel’s past appears almost human. At times He is repentant,¹⁰¹ and emotionally all but out of reach of our prayers.¹⁰² At least once in the record He confessed bewilderment.¹⁰³ At times He demanded fidelity¹⁰⁴ and was, seemingly, hesitant to forgive¹⁰⁵ but at other times forgiving¹⁰⁶ and quick to ignore disloyalty.¹⁰⁷

When Israel accused God of abandoning them, alleging, “*The LORD has forsaken me!*”¹⁰⁸

God explained, “*I will answer you when I think it time [when I feel like it].*”¹⁰⁹

The Bible is replete with—what appears as—

¹⁰¹ Genesis 6:6 The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.

¹⁰² Habakkuk 1:2 How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

¹⁰³ Hosea 11:8 My heart is changed within me

¹⁰⁴ Exodus 20:5-6 punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love

¹⁰⁵ Jeremiah 5:7 “Why should I forgive you?”

¹⁰⁶ Jeremiah 31:34 “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

¹⁰⁷ Acts 17:30 in the past God overlooked such ignorance

¹⁰⁸ Isaiah 49:14 But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.”

¹⁰⁹ Isaiah 49:8 this is what the LORD says: “In the time of my favor I will answer you” God had designated 70 years of Babylonian captivity first before He would return them as a nation to Judea.

contradictory positions taken by God in regard to Israel. But these are not contradictions at all but a decision on God's part to relate to Israel in their humanness on a level they could better understand. It was¹¹⁰ a challenge, indeed, for God to profile Himself as the holy God that He is to a people who were far removed intellectually, emotionally and spiritually from Him. They, in effect, did not speak the same language or, as the saying goes, God and man were not "on the same page."

He needed to reveal His heart in ways recognizable by Israel ..and us. My mom once with raised voice exclaimed, "If I don't yell, you kids will never listen!" This reminds me of something Hosea said of Israel: *They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling.*

God needed to interpret some of His interests in the context of our world—not His. God became an Israelite to the Israelites¹¹¹—as later He would become a man [His incarnation through Jesus Christ] to bring His plan to fruition for our salvation.¹¹²

When Moses, Israel's leader disappeared into a nearby mountain for over a month, the people erected the image of a calf made of pure gold to worship instead of a God they didn't know and could not see or feel. They were circling in the wilderness supposedly on their way from

¹¹⁰ Exodus 34:14 Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

¹¹¹ Isaiah 44:6-7 This is what the Lord says—
Israel's King ... I established
my ancient people....

¹¹² John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Egypt to “the Promise Land” when they decided to institute a pagan practice that infuriated God.

Exactly how God felt is a question left for the ages. I could not know God’s exact feelings any more than I could know yours if your spouse were caught in an affair—this is the comparison scripture makes.¹¹³

I must admit that I didn’t expect to hear God tell Moses, “*Leave me alone!*” but He did. God’s feelings were intense! Perhaps He was feeling jealousy¹¹⁴ or some other emotional pain¹¹⁵, All we know is that He was “hot” and He didn’t want to talk about it. He wanted to be left alone perhaps to contemplate the option of starting over again with Moses as He had once done with Noah [the story of the flood.. remember?]. Enraged and hurt God blurted out,

Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.¹¹⁶

Our studies about God recognize He had a mind: His wisdom, His omniscience. We fail to study His heart, though, perhaps because, while “mind” is an academic idea, “heart” is a term of relationship, which requires a life of prayer. We may fail to see this side of God because there has been no serious relationship with Him through prayer. Those who do not talk to Him will never learn how He feels; no amount of academic studies can teach this. But even the saintliest saint is imperfect here. Getting to

¹¹³ Hosea 1:2 When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.

¹¹⁴ Exodus 34:14 Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God

¹¹⁵ Ephesians 4:30 And do not grieve [pain] the Holy Spirit of God

¹¹⁶ Exodus 32:9

know and understand God is like getting to know and understand a spouse. It takes a lifetime plus; so, failures along the way are merely stumbling steps. Get back up and walk on.

Conversing with God as we get to know Him better offers at times surprising lessons. On one occasion Moses took his staff to a rock after God instructed him to speak to it. A stream of water flowed from it for all to drink but God considered it a misrepresentation of His feelings. Moses was angry here, but God was not! So God vowed to keep Moses out of the promise land when Joshua finally led Israel across the Jordan river into Palestine. Moses pestered God to change His mind but He wouldn't budge. Moses blamed Israel. [What else is new!?] According to Moses:¹¹⁷ *Because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. "That is enough," the LORD said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter.*

Truth be told: we may not know exactly how God felt but we can sympathize on some level in our humanity. I recall Super bowl 38, 1994, when the Buffalo Bills lost for the fourth time in a row. A friend, with whom I was watching the game, became deeply despondent over the loss but his fiancé, who didn't follow football, thought it ridiculous to invest so much time and emotion in a sporting event. She started to confront him when I stepped between and with whispered plea pushed her away with my stare. She didn't understand his feelings nor the moment. I did.

To know that God is angry enough to kill should be sufficient to warn us of something important to Him. To

¹¹⁷ Deuteronomy 3:26

us His burning anger may be just a term; to God, however, it was an intense experience. Moses, because of his ongoing friendship with God, was able to take God seriously, and lovingly calm God before He made good His threat.

Having a Stroke

Would God have began again? I wonder what that would have meant for Israel's history or our theologies! But God stayed the course, perhaps, because Moses interceded for Israel. Gregory the Great might have caught the essence of this moment in maintaining that God was providing Moses with opportunity to petition the great heart, to mediate this ongoing dispute between Him and Israel, and ultimately, to mitigate His rage and assuage His pain.¹¹⁸ Friends are there for one another and Moses was a friend of God.¹¹⁹

But Moses sought the favor [stroked the face] of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'¹²⁰

What follows is Moses stroking God's face¹²¹ in an effort to calm the great heart and help Him, God, get back His

¹¹⁸ deprecandi ansam praeberere "provide an opportunity to petition" - Gregory the Great Keil and Delitzsch Commentary p 224f

¹¹⁹ Exodus 33:11 The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

¹²⁰ Exodus 32:11-13

¹²¹ Exodus 32:11 וַיִּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-פָּנָיו יְהוָה

perspective. When a woman runs the palm of her hand gently over her man's cheek, he is often made docile, calming him and providing her with opportunity to get what she wants. Moses, by his prayer, in this metaphorical sense, ran his palm over God's cheek. What a prayer!

Here is a prayer narrated as an open dialogue between friends. How can anyone perceive God as distant and uninvolved? God's anger took two chapters or 58 verses of Scripture before He was able to lead Israel again toward—ironically—"the Promised Land." It was this "promise" Moses had to repeatedly remind God about. God had made it to Abraham.

Moses pushed back when God suggested starting over without the people in tow. Moses pushed back again when God then decided that He wouldn't come along. God apparently wanted to have nothing more to do with Israel. Let Moses lead Israel without Him. Moses argued back: If God didn't want them; He didn't want him either. So, God threatened to kill them all, He was so enraged and hurt.

If we listen closely we can hear not just the words but the spirit of an enduring friendship behind them. Somehow, Moses knew how to talk to God. He would intercede for Israel when they were dangerously close to losing God's guidance altogether. (One generation never did complete the journey. They died in the Wilderness. Remember: Israel had an affair with an idol which was a deep offense to God.) Ultimately, because God cherished Moses' friendship, He would give Israel another chance.

Moses *But now, please forgive their sin¹²²—but if not,*

¹²² "Idolatry inevitably, in such analysis, leads to the failure of humans to reflect the image of the true God, that is, the value to be genuinely human: this means 'missing-the-mark', hamartina, in other words, 'sin'." - N. T. Wright.

then blot me out of the book you have written.

God *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*¹²³
*Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.*¹²⁴

(God turns His attention to Israel. He is furious.)

*I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.*¹²⁵ *If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.*¹²⁶

Moses *If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.*¹²⁷

Narrator *The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*¹²⁸

(God is much calmer now, thanks to Moses' friendship.)

God *I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.*¹²⁹

Narrator *Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.*¹³⁰

Is it possible our praying might in effect stroke the face of God again and provide someone with a second chance with God? It seems less likely that this would be the case since Jesus on the Cross forgave everyone and those who believe shouldn't need to worry about God's anger.

Paul: In Fresh Perspective. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2009) p 88.

¹²³ Exodus 33:19.

¹²⁴ Exodus 32:32-33.

¹²⁵ Exodus 33:3.

¹²⁶ Exodus 33:5.

¹²⁷ Exodus 33:15.

¹²⁸ Exodus 33:11.

¹²⁹ Exodus 33:17.

¹³⁰ Exodus 32:14

Does God still get emotional?

He does.¹³¹ How about interceding in prayer for those who have not yet discovered the love of God! Or praying for a believer who is struggling with “sin.”¹³²

Of course, God is not always angry or jealous or hurt. He also gets excited over faithfulness. There are other feelings worth experiencing, good ones. I like to imagine what is described in Zephaniah 3:17:

The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over [leap for joy over] you with singing.

What’s wrong with a prayer time that enriches God’s pleasure? What’s wrong with living in such a way that God wants to leap for joy because of us. We should be talking to God for *His* sake and not just ours. He wants us to talk to Him to get to know Him better. He enjoys our communion simply for the joy of the relationship. How about talking to Him simply out of love.

Scripture compares our praying to a sweet incense, a sacrifice on our part, ascending to God, pleasing to Him.¹³³

¹³¹ Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

¹³² I John 5:16 If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life

¹³³ Revelation 8:4. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up before God from the angel’s hand
compare Philippians 4:18 They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

When It All Began

As a child, growing up in Buffalo, New York on the West side, I had experiences that suggested to my mother that God was looking over her young son but this was not my early impression. Life may have included a few of Elijah's "wind, earthquake and fire"¹³⁴ adventures that indeed hinted at the passing shadow of the Almighty. But like Elijah's experience, "*the LORD was not in [these]*" for me. The prophet wisely waited—as we all should—on that soft whisper of the voice of God before he could say "I have heard from God." Elijah was—I guess—less impressed with miracles, having been involved with them on a number of occasions. An earthquake didn't impress him as much as God speaking to him '*sotto voce*.'

Likewise, we should not be surprised to enjoy from time to time some good fortune that just might have the divine fingerprint all over it—good things happen to all of us. The rain does fall upon the just and the unjust. But it is a common mistake for believers to place undue emphasis on these wind, earthquake and fire moments instead of desiring to hear from God in prayer.

Drawn to Its Pages

My prayer journey didn't begin until I was fifteen but I recall a few experiences, a few seismological events in my early days, a blaze or 2 of strange passion, starting as early as age 7 that didn't suggest anything to me then but give me pause now that I am in my seventies. For one, I was

¹³⁴ 1 Kings 19:11 & 12.

fascinated by the Bible at that young age. I recall how “drawn” I was to its pages. On one occasion, my cousin, Dot, and I spent time on her front porch with pencils in hand copying a sentence or 2 of a text that had at the time no meaning to me—if memory serves, from Ezekiel or one of the prophetic books.

When Rev. Friedley, a friend of the family, gifted me with a “New Testament with Psalms” (I was 11 or 12) I received it with an innate sense of awe and respect for what it represented—although I didn’t read it.

I looked forward to Vacation Bible School one summer at the Baptist church on the corner of West Ferry and Nineteenth streets. I took pleasure in memorizing the scriptures we were instructed to learn during that week.

The Sentinel

When I finally did begin to read the Bible, I got hung up on Genesis 1:1. This one verse for me was charged with sentinel duties to direct all who pass by to read on. This one verse was the watchman on the wall, the garrison at the gate, of all Truth. If one could not accept this one verse by faith, the rest of God’s Word remained a closed book. But I wanted to linger here for at least one life time—God opening up to my understanding the rest of His Truth in the ages to come. But my journey in prayer had not begun yet. The value of prayer wasn’t clear to me as a child—and God seemed okay with that.

Asthma

As a child I was a victim of asthma which at times was life threatening. There was no money for hospital beds, no

inhalers, and no steroids. My grandma assisted my mom in heating baby diapers laid over my bare chest caked with Vicks vapor rub while I labored to breath. Hours rolled into days before I was breathing naturally again, coughing up sputum, green and congealed like thickened gelatin. But I was at peace. I remember being aware of that special sense that all is well now. Yet more than that, I recall the feeling that later I came to identify in prayer. It is easy for me to imagine that at the time I was being nursed back to health by more than my mom and grandma. Someone else was present but my journey in prayer had not begun here.

The Why Behind the What

How much can a small child or a pre-teen appreciate the “why” behind the “what” that they are experiencing? And what if it is God, it is more likely than not that the divine activity goes unexplained though not unnoticed? When I was 12 or 13, I attended my second VBS, this time at the Assembly of God church at East Delavan and Chelsea Sts. I had the opportunity, unplanned by me and unexpected, to accompany a boy, perhaps, a year younger than myself, to the altar because he wanted to say the sinner’s prayer and he was instructed by the preacher in charge to come forward and say it there. On my ride home on the church bus, I was almost overcome with elation (a kind-of delightful anxiety) over the thought that I had been involved in this young lad’s salvation experience. I was euphoric and it did not dawn on me to wonder why. I had never been that excited in that way even though I had been excited about a lot of things before: Christmas, for one, comes to mind. Why this boy’s encounter with grace

would overjoy me was a question I would not entertain for years yet, even though, there is, for the believer, a definite link with God in all this. But my prayer journey had not begun yet.

Unseen Prayers

I am persuaded that much of God's work on our behalf is not the result of our own praying but, the prayers of another person, primarily the Savior.¹³⁵

He ...lives to intercede for them.¹³⁶

Long before I began to see praying as a way of life different events and experiences suggested something might be happening as a result of someone seeking God on my behalf. It could have been a mother. It could have been our Lord. It could have been anyone unheralded and unknown by me—perhaps similar to the way I used to pray for my schoolmates. There were signs alone the way that for a believer are no less telling of God's guiding hand. Those times when bronchial pneumonia took me from school weeks at a time and proved a serious illness, was someone seeking God on my behalf? Most definitely.

If we believe that God does everything as a consequence or effect of someone's prayers, we should be grateful to know that there are still those believers who have developed a life of prayer.

The scripture—I might point out by example—curiously suggests that end time divine justice will be the product of

¹³⁵ Romans 8:34 Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

¹³⁶ Hebrews 7:25.

centuries of believers praying for God to bring it about.¹³⁷

As already noted, behind the story of Israel's exodus from Egyptian bondage—an account upon which all Biblical history and all christian theology hinges—¹³⁸was Moses praying for God's unfaithful people. So, as a believer, I should not be too surprised to see doors of opportunity open, timely physical recovery, or unanticipated sources of financial help as a result of someone else praying for me.

Always With You

But in those early days prayer was not the emphasis. I was developing a keen interest in studying the Bible. I had a map of Palestine on my bedroom wall on which I plotted the 3 missionary journeys of Paul. I had a copy of Schofield's notes in book form [Schofield's expository comments were familiar explanations appearing as footnotes to the scriptures in one of my first bibles] which I meticulously researched while studying the book of the Revelation. I even made a papier-mâché three-dimensional relief map of the Holy Land from the Cedars of Lebanon to the Gulf of Aqaba. I raised—or tried to raise—the tableland around Jerusalem to scale.

I was into the Bible but not prayer. I hadn't thought to ask God questions. I sought answers from books but

¹³⁷ Revelation 5:8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

¹³⁸ According to the Blue Letter Bible no fewer than 74 times between Gen 13:1–1Ki 8:51 reference is made to God's delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage

without praying about it first.

Putting an emphasis on prayer as a natural expression of my hunger to know God was not a regular expression of my christianity. Doctor Beuttler spoke more than once of developing a prayer habit, setting time aside on a regular basis to talk to God. I wasn't there yet.

The moment when the importance of prayer took a leap forward had to be the summer of 1960. I was fifteen and found myself kneeling in wood shavings and weeping at an old fashion camp bench. I was one of many teens who were there lining the benches or standing eyes closed, some alone, others in small groups. Everyone in his and her own way was seeking God. I kept asking Jesus, almost begging Him—Jesus, not God, not the Lord, but *Jesus*—not to leave me even though He promised that He never would.

A Heart Thing

The scriptural promise is clear:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."¹³⁹

There are five *no's* in this verse in the original which represents an increased emphasis. The Lord will never, never, [five times] leave us! So prayerfully asking the Lord to never leave us seems a debatable, if not a needless, waste of effort because regardless of whether or not we petition Him to stay near, He's going to anyways. This has led some would-be scholars to tweak their prayers to sound more reasonable or practical. They pray for things that make more sense to them or that are not already

¹³⁹ Hebrews 13:5.

written in stone as a well-known promise of God.

They are misled. Asking the Lord to do something or not allow something which is already promised or a reasonable expression of His character might seem wasted breath or at least a questionable way to pray, but ...Not so!

When the Lord taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9-13 He included the words: "*lead us not into temptation.*"¹⁴⁰

When would God lead us into a temptation?

Well, *never*.¹⁴¹

Regardless of the wording, prayer is essentially asking our Lord for His merciful guidance. Prayer is not a head thing. It is not intended as a catechism, where we must memorize it correctly lest God refuses to hear us. Real prayer reveals the cry of the *heart* not the rationale of the head. The heart does not speak in the language of theology but a language of longing after God.

I am again reminded of the psalmist's quest for God:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.¹⁴²

The summer of 1960 was the time I began to pray conversationally. It was as if I was kneeling at the feet of the Savior, actually talking to Him, and He was actually listening. It was truly a relational moment when I discovered that He was there!¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ The words in the Lord's Prayer that ask, "Lead us not into temptation," can cause confusion, Francis said. To make it clear that God would not lead anybody toward sin, the pope suggested a better translation of the Greek prayer from the New Testament would be something along the lines of, "Do not let us fall into temptation."

¹⁴¹ James 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

¹⁴² Psalm 42:1.

¹⁴³ Jehovah-Shammah - Ezekiel 48:35 And the name of the city from that time on will be: the Lord is there.

I am reminded of the Spanish chorus, which is what I and all believers are ultimately meaning to say to the Lord when we spend time with Him: No hay lugar más alto que estar a tus pies [There is no higher place than at Your feet.] As Luke, the beloved physician noted, and there is no more powerful and enduring expression of a life of prayer, *“Mary ... sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.”*¹⁴⁴

Going for a Walk

In 1963 and '64 I attended the State University of New York at Buffalo. I commuted, usually by bus. On good days in the Autumn and Spring, I would walk the approximately five and a half miles home. Criss-crossing through the North and East end of the city I came down East Utica, crossed over Main Street to West Utica and unto the west end and home. I’m sure it was at least an hour’s hike and while I walked, I would pray (with my eyes open, of course.)

I always had many things to “discuss” with the Lord: the new experience of being at the University and my class work; my Sunday material I needed to prepare for a small “Sunday School” class I taught weekly; my girlfriend; or just the pleasantness of such a peaceful stroll for which I was grateful and didn’t mind telling Him so. Occasionally someone was on my mind and heart and I found it a relief to talk to Him about them, too. But generally, I didn’t ask for much; I just enjoyed His presence. (God is a personal God which I believe was with me on these walks home.)

When I spoke to God, I addressed Him either as my heavenly Father or I spoke to Jesus directly. (Thought you

¹⁴⁴ Luke 10:39.

might want the detail.) This was no doubt my christian background and theology influenced me. Someone else might just address Him as “God.” I never prayed to the “Holy Spirit” and I cannot specifically recall referencing God as simply “God” but this should not matter. What matters is realizing who we are speaking with and recognizing His benevolence because He is merciful. Talking to Jesus or my heavenly Father fit well with my understanding of scripture. Jesus encourages us to talk to Him.

Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.¹⁴⁵

Religious people might find these distinctions important but I just wanted to talk to Him, the God who is merciful. Yes, the name “Jesus” has a great significance to me since He was and is my Savior.¹⁴⁶ And not to honor this truth would be the same as not recognizing who I was talking to. I really wanted an audience with “Him,” my Savior and my God.

These meanderings, as I took slightly different routes from time to time, were very meaningful times in which I felt I was getting to know God personally, even though—yes!—I did all the talking. And I saw results in my life that seemed to confirm that He was working on issues I raised. Two years later, 1965, I would be off to another school to learn the Bible.

But the walks with God—and I spoke to Him of many things—became a key avenue of prayer. The cover of this work is itself a picture of the lane at Bible college that I

¹⁴⁵ John 16:23.

¹⁴⁶ John 14:6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

used to stroll up and down after dinner while communicating my interests to God. This became a vital expression of who I was becoming in my relationship with Him.

The Tabernacle

I began my Bible training officially in 1965 to become a minister. I will always remember when our pastor's wife and her friend drove me to the school and left me alone at the side of this country road where it met the lane leading onto campus somewhere in Eastern Pennsylvania, Montgomery County. I stood there for a moment perhaps a bit apprehensive while trying to piece together the personal history that led to here.¹⁴⁷ I began slowly to compose my thoughts sufficient to take one step closer to the campus. I took another and began to walk cautiously into what was to become my future.

The evening I arrived at NBI the air was different—a precursor of exciting things to come—fresh and refreshing, unlike the diurnal metallic tasting smog of the city. I would soon discover the night sky. The city sky was a canopy of darkness denying the stars their admiring audience. The sky on campus, here in the country, was a universe of lights that always spoke to this Sunday school graduate of divine covenants. But, then, all this was frightening to me for I had only read about such things in books.

As I walked unto campus a soft breeze caressed my shoulders like an ordained comfort. I sauntered along making my way first to "The Tabernacle," an open air sanctuary on the edge of this small plot of land where I

¹⁴⁷ see the Appendix: The Rest of the Story

would spend the next three years before marrying and spending my final year off campus. The Tabernacle was a sideless, wooden tent with rows of old unpainted benches—space enough to seat a thousand worshippers. But aside from God, I was alone. Silent tears watered my cheeks as I walked toward the platform. I longed for God to make sense of this.

Am I where He wanted me to be!? In my heart, I could have no future without Him; so, if this was a gross misstep, I was, indeed, in a difficult place. I was already being eaten alive by nostalgia. I had never been away from the city for more than a week at a time and that only a few times in twenty years and now that thought was pushing its way to the front of the line to be heard: I might never go back! From school, as it turned out, I would start ministry that would lead me farther away from the only home in the only culture in the only city I had ever known.

I strolled up and down among those empty benches, making my way behind the platform into a makeshift prayer room and back out again, talking to God, sharing my heart, my anxiety, my homesickness, and above all, my desire to follow Him. It wasn't a question of His forsaking me; it was a question of my not forsaking Him.

An hour [?] went by when I finally continued my walk to the administration building. I was on my way.

More Questions

There is a word for prayer in the Bible that I must admit I would not have considered to be a form of prayer.¹⁴⁸ But a more recent and closer examination of the use of this term in scripture led me to believe that this word best fits the kind of praying which is not asking God for things (not a request) but an inquiry, asking God for answers or guidance. This prayer like all prayer is an expression of a heartfelt desire but it does not represent a request for some specific response from God. It leaves the details to Him. It is a time of conversing with God, giving Him our problem or our concern and letting Him tend to the details as He might.

When Jesus prayed for His disciples—and by extension, us, as well¹⁴⁹—He didn't ask for things. He used this word for prayer: He was praying *for* us, not for a list of blessings but for or concerning our commitment to His impending death and resurrection., that our faith in what He has shared with us would become a life changing trust in God. He told our heavenly Father,

I **pray** for them. I am not **praying** for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.¹⁵⁰

The key to understanding the difference between a request and an inquiry in this prayer is found in the last four word: "*for they are yours.*" Scholarship interprets this

¹⁴⁸ ἐρωτάω - in Greek writings from Homer down it means to question. It derives from a word meaning to investigate. In John 12:21 *They came to Philip ... with a request.* "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." But the form of a request should be "May we see Jesus." This was correctly an inquiry.

¹⁴⁹ John 17:20 My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.

¹⁵⁰ John 17:9.

passage, “*This general prayer is an equivalent to ‘I commend them to Thee [to God, the Father].’*”¹⁵¹ Jesus was asking the father to “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*”¹⁵² Yet exactly how, Jesus left those details to His Father.

Talking to God is not just a matter of asking for specific things or blessings or a miracle or two. Prayer is sometimes a more general inquiry into life itself while we try to investigate or evaluate the depth of our own commitment to God, whether our life has been worth the sweat and blood, whether we have succeeded at anything important, or simply are the mistakes we have made along the way fixable.

Ever feel like getting some answers from God ...and I am not talking about answered prayer but answers to questions about our past decisions, the choices we made whether He was in those decisions or in agreement with them or behind them in some way? Have you ever wondered what the purpose of it all might be, if it has to do with ministry (or ministry missed), or if it has to do with a personal growth issue, becoming like Christ? (And this especially because we might feel so distant from His example.)

Did I go to the right college? Should I have gone at all? Did I marry right? [Too soon? Too many times? Wrong person(s)?] And what about the doors of ministry that appeared open, were these doors kicked in by my own efforts?

Not everyone lives with regrets or the constant disapproval of associates or co-workers. Some of us retire

¹⁵¹ Frederick Louis Godet. *Commentary of the Gospel Of John*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonervan Publishing House. 1970) p 332.

¹⁵² John 17:17.

knowing that life turned out just the way we thought it would. But I venture to say these persons are few.

So much of life for so many seems to follow a path to “disaster” (my word, not God’s). We seem addicted to things we know are wrong for us. We can’t stop or we don’t want to stop. Temptation, at least at times for some of us, might seem to be more a companion than God, Himself.

We tend to evaluate life in terms of some definition for achievement or success we live with in our heads. Even if our understanding of these terms is warped, depraved, or skewed, it is our understanding. And all these questions are generated from this single—truth be told—misunderstanding of how success should be seen or what we perceive as the best life. And boy! Are we jealous of the guy who made All-State and then went on to be a doctor to cure cancer, while we take out the garbage and wonder when the next season of the “House of Cards” is coming out. While grabbing another bag of chips from atop the refrigerator we come to the final question: Was this life worth it!?

There is so much here to pray about! And please, don’t wait until you are spending your days sitting in your favorite rocking chair, covered with the quilt your grandmother made for you, and staring out a window you don’t even care anymore hasn’t been cleaned for years.

There is so much here to pray about concerning ourselves and for others we know who have such concerns of their own—and that includes the doctor who cured cancer because we should never assume we are alone in our need to talk to God. Some of the most successful people (in our eyes) are the loneliest and most despondent.

* * *

Ask God.

I was sixteen (I cannot remember dates but I tend to associate dates with the times and this was around the time I met my friend Gary). Back then the pastor organized a mid-week bible study to which I faithfully showed up. Not unusual, as he spoke of this and that my mind raced on ahead marking the path with the breadcrumbs of a hundred questions I was intent on asking him when the study ended for the evening. Afterward as he descended the stairway from the upper room (how appropriately named) in which we gathered for the study I matched his gait step for step while picking up the crumbs (my questions recalled) and force-feeding them to him one after another after another. Suddenly, he stopped. Was he needing to focus and think through some astute answer to my last question? Not exactly. Just then he sighed and betraying his exhaustion and wanting to bring this night to a merciful end, he sighed, "John, Ask God!"

What a brilliant idea which, until pastor mentioned it, I had never thought to do. But it was more than an excuse on his part to flick away an attached annoyance, it was a life changing word of advice. I began to do just this and never got the feeling I was exhausting the Almighty.

Asking Graciously

The Lord wants us to bother Him. Actually, we are no bother at all when we are talking to Him. What bothers Him is our silence. As the Apostle Paul observed,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer

and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.¹⁵³

I am not the scholar from which you need to hear to distinguish the meanings of 7 New Testament words for prayer.¹⁵⁴ (See the appendix on this subject.) My story is not a lesson in theology or a study in the words for prayer but a glance at my personal experience in talking to God.

Does this include complaints and disappointments?

Why not? “..*prayer ... with thanksgiving...*” doesn’t mean that I should appreciate everything that happens to me when it is painful or confusing or unexplained. But like in a marriage, God and I are in this boat together. It is the circumstance—not God—that I am finding at the time so very unpleasant.

When the disciples in a Galilean storm asked Jesus, “*Don’t you care if we perish!*?”¹⁵⁵ Did they go too far?¹⁵⁶ Or was Jesus able to read the heart past the words spoken in fear rather than faith? I would recommend *not* saying something that borders on an accusation that Jesus doesn’t care. We know nothing could be farther from the truth. But, then again: I wasn’t there! God is probably a bigger man than I when it comes to a few possibly misspoken words.

More than a Petition

My story is more than just the diary of my talking to God. It is the story of a developing friendship and trust. It is the story of a mutual support, God’s guidance and my

¹⁵³ Philippians 4:6.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/trench/section.cfm?sectionID=51>

¹⁵⁵ Mark 4: 38 Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?

¹⁵⁶ Interesting that Luke’s sources word this in a gracious way: [8:24] Master, master, we perish.

faithfulness or lack, thereof. Although I have examples of times I let God down or spent too much time sidetracked in my own interests while He wanted my attention, I have always wanted that closeness with Him that alone can make sense out of the journey I have called life.

Relationships are built on trust. Relationships are built on communication. Relationships are built on the art of listening to one another with an empathic understanding that chooses words and thoughts that even in the midst of pain never loses sight of the friendship. Relationships are built on a kindness and honesty that strengthens the bond between two persons and this is no less true when one is God.¹⁵⁷

It makes more sense for a believer to measure their boldness and couch their requests in terms that are as real as possible. We are petitioning the Supreme Ruler of all time and space! He has held out to us His Scepter¹⁵⁸, as the psalmist noted:

Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. You rule with a scepter of justice.¹⁵⁹

We have reason always to thank Him. But we tend to be more familiar with a God who calls us “friend”¹⁶⁰ instead of “servant,” who sticks [adheres to us in relationship] closer than a brother,¹⁶¹ whose love by comparison makes

¹⁵⁷ Song of Solomon 2:16 My beloved is mine and I am his...

¹⁵⁸ Esther 8:4 Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.

¹⁵⁹ Psalm 45:6.

¹⁶⁰ John 15:15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

¹⁶¹ Proverbs 18:24 there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

motherhood appear indifferent to an infant's cries.¹⁶² We need to know our place before Him without losing the openness to speak our hearts.¹⁶³

Life Totally Sucks.

I like to follow one simple rule in conversation with God: watch the hyperboles. Life doesn't suck ...not "totally" Only a little bit ...maybe a little bit more today than yesterday. Maybe! I don't need to wear rose colored glasses. Still, it isn't always easy to see my life with a perspective that more faithfully represents the trust relationship I do have with my Lord.

The advice given in wise marriage counseling works for any serious relationship. We need to communicate our feelings, needs, desires, and wants to each other but without projecting on our partner or on the relationship all the sorrows of the world. Talking to God with respect for His love for us carries the same advice. He responds to tears¹⁶⁴ (not the crocodile kind). God wants to show mercy and lovingkindness.¹⁶⁵

Being honest about our needs—even if our perspective is childish—is not something that turns God off. Back when, our, then, 3 year old son cried tearfully that he wanted to ride the school bus like his big brother, I didn't smile with

¹⁶² Isaiah 49:15 Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

¹⁶³ Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

¹⁶⁴ Psalm 51:17 a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

¹⁶⁵ Lamentations 3:22-23 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

disinterest and then ignore him. He deserved a big hug. We knew when comforting was called for ...and so does God!

Then there was the time one of our sons (He was around five or six) was emotionally imploding while we watched our favorite football team getting beat badly by a rival team. My boy was jumping up and down, crying "his eyes out" begging me to get the phone book and find the number under "football." He wanted me to make the call and tell them that our opponent was cheating. I, as a parent, sought only to calm him and help him accept defeat on occasion. Our team would rise again.

The scripture comes to mind:

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? If you then, ... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!¹⁶⁶

It is not a stretch to believe that our God would treat us with equal if not more sensitivity and caring than a natural parent would their children. The psalmist, again:

The LORD is close¹⁶⁷ to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Qiyqayown

Have you heard the story of the qiyqayown? [pronounced: kē·kă·yōn'] It is a tall biennial plant, quick growing but easily killed if slightly injured. The Egyptians called it a "kiki." The ancient greeks called it a kolokúntha; so, we decided to call it a "gourd." Anyway, Jonah was enjoying its shade when it withered on him allowing the hot sun and desert breeze to scorch the very desire to live out of

¹⁶⁶ Luke 11:11, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Psalm 34:18.

him. He was furious. The Bible story is so picturesque: He burned hot with anger (right back at the sun! As if that would solve anything.) Jonah's child side was visible.

For those who do not know the story: Jonah was told by God to go to a city called Nineveh and share with them the thought that God wanted to be merciful to them if they would only accept His terms of repentance from untold evil the city was involved in. [If they didn't repent, the city was marked for complete destruction, children and animals included, which actually happened years later by Alexander the Great.] Jonah had a temper tantrum not only because of the hot sun but because God had sent him to bless one of Jonah's most hated enemies.

God responded lovingly in a language that is replete with psychological insight (I put this text in the language of children):

God: Jonah, Is it a good idea to be so angry?

Jonah: Yes!

God: You are saddened over the death of the plant but not the children and their pets!?

The lesson to take from this (among many others) is how God is a wise counsellor worth talking to.¹⁶⁸

Childish Prayers

Much of my conversation with God is very private. I share everything with Him as if He had no idea until I told Him. Theologically that isn't the way we see it. God is omniscient, and if He is omniscient, He had to know I was

¹⁶⁸ Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

going to take apart something that He would have to reassemble later. I can't imagine God getting too surprised in all this. I mention this not as if I had some great revelation to share about God's feelings or thoughts—I don't—but as an encouragement for us to keep praying, keep talking to Him, keep repenting, keep asking Him to look into the matter of what we consider our spiritual struggles, our most vulnerable moments to temptation. Believers have many rationalized excuses against praying: no time, don't know how, etc. None of these are real to a God who stands ready to listen anytime, anywhere. He is not offended by your thoughts, your honesty, your need of grace. Heck! That's why He's listening!

Probably most prayers are childish prayers, crying to God because I can't ride the school bus. And how many times did we request God to give our ball team the winning stroke!

I remember Dave who was—by his own admission—in love with 2 women and didn't know which to choose. One close friend said he should pray about it and called him "fickled." He mildly rejoined, "I have been praying, but it's been 3 days!"

I once asked an elderly saint (in her eighties) to pray for John who just lost his job in the mill. He was single, living at home, and had for years been making a great wage: when the plant closed. Displaying her response to my request with her hand sweeping backward through the air in a dismissive gesture of disinterest she retorted, "He doesn't need prayer for this!" I am sure his mother disagreed but to this octogenarian there were more pressing burdens just then on God's heart.

* * *

No More Questions

If you think about it: too many questions is somehow a personal search for perfection not answers. Perhaps it is not answers we need as much as a deepening trust in a God Who has the answers to the important inquiries. For the rest we only need to know He is near.

“The only way to overcome this {perceived lack of answers}”, another commentator correctly enlightens us, “is by ultimate fellowship with Christ at the deepest level.”¹⁶⁹ He concludes, “Asking is, of course, the way to attain to full fellowship with the Son and the Father.”¹⁷⁰

So what are we saying?

We are saying that much of our musing over the questions of life needs no answer. The purpose of this form of prayer is to seek out a closeness with God Who is Himself the ultimate answer to all life’s questions. There is no entry in the yellow pages under “football” that I can call to accuse a rival team of cheating and throw life’s game my way. I must simply play it out letting God coach me through it.

But this means the questioning does serve a lofty purpose. The more the questions, the more I should be encouraged to meet with God in prayer about them. But I don’t ask for answers. I am satisfied to just talk about them. I find it meaningful to bring every concern to God in prayer even if I cannot wrap it in a request. I find it meaningful to share with Him the detailed account of all my temptations and alleged failings. God does listen. The

¹⁶⁹ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol II. p 685.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

John King

years have proven that it is the Lord I wanted all along and not answers.

Counseling Sessions

There is a joke told by a psychiatrist that lawyers make the best patients because they are never cured and they have lots of money. I cannot speak for either profession but I know that over the years I have known persons who have had issues that were not resolved in one counseling session. I am respectfully reminded of those persons in my travels—and I speak of them lovingly—who came to me because they were carrying a heavy load of guilt they could not discard; nor could they in clear conscience creatively fashion whatever it was they did into a more pleasing memory. And when they said, “I’ll never do that again!” they found that outburst to be more a hopeless self-deception than a satisfying resolution. Whatever troubled them in the way they were behaving was haunting them now, laughing at how little fortitude they had to stop themselves.

Some persons seem immune to feelings of guilt. This is not to label them or analyze them, but some engage in forms of behavior that others are ashamed to even think about. This might have something to do with how the conscience was formed through instruction, discipline, adult example, peer pressure, and even social norm. As Dr. Griffin informs us,

All of us are conditioned by the values and belief systems we are immersed in. Our politics, religion and moral values are an accident of birth and none of us chooses the bed we are born in.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Joe Griffin; Ivan Tyrrell. *Human Givens* (East Sussex, United Kingdom:Human Givens Publishing, Chalvington, East Sussex:Human Givens Publishing Ltd., 2013): *The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* (Kindle Locations 1697-1700).

Before the christian missionaries arrived even the children of the Sawi people in Indonesia were taught to kill and eat a human being despite their natural repulsion to such barbarity.

And yes, sometimes guilt is totally misplaced. We are led to think what we are doing is wrong when it is perfectly ethical, moral and has no effect for good or bad on the people we care about. I still think the evangelical church should reconsider the use of wine—at least red wine—to aid digestion. Even a small glass of beer a day—not the apple—may help keep the doctor away, but many religious people frown on these ideas.

As a pastor, I have counseled a number of individuals who were tormented by some commitment they felt was wrong for them after they got involved. The whole idea seemed exciting when it drew them to that cliff but not so good once they found themselves slipping over it. I am reminded of the old hymn, "*Farther Along*:"

Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long
While there are others living about us
Never molested though in the wrong.

Temptations know no future; they exist only in the moment. It might be a moment of ecstasy but it is just a moment. There is no future in temptations because they are not planned out. Temptations have no goal in mind other than the immediate thrill, the excitement, in the doing. Temptations are the promptings of a desire once the desired object is in sight and they quickly dissipate, an evanescent memory as soon enjoyed, soon forgotten. A temptation is but a desire that craves a satisfaction soon lost if found at all. Its ultimate form is a profligate lifestyle stealing all one's interests and time.

But yielding to temptations are often mislabeled if society accepts such actions as normal human behavior. It seems regrettable that the word “temptation” like the word “forgiveness” has fallen out of use outside religious circles. Instead of forgiving, we are encouraged to avoid the people whose lights we want to punch out. And if we are tempted, it may be a guilt imposed on us by a culture that has no such right and we should move to a society that accepts us “as-is.” A lifestyle of searching for that elusive high, that temporary thrill, in places once thought forbidden, is in today’s civilized, postmodern, existentialistic world considered acceptable. Guilt along with the moral code that supports it, in today’s evolving world, are considered to be an archaic leftover of a superstitious past.

The word “temptation” suggests wrong doing but it isn’t the feeling that has a moral quality attached. It is the act. A good counselor can help us find our way out of this jungle of twisted and ambivalent feelings. A good counselor helps us find that perspective that reconciles us with our actions and our past. We might reach the conclusion that what we did does not serve us in our relationships and this activity should be discontinued. A good counselor can walk with us through the weeks and even months needed to reach this point. And I quickly add: God gives amazing advice and counsel according to the prophet.

This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.¹⁷²

Getting out of this kind of personal trouble is never an easy fix. Talking to God about what you are doing and how you feel provides an opportunity for God to give

¹⁷² Isaiah 28:29 in RSV.

guidance and hope. His help may come in the form of a thought or a message or even the love of a child, but it will come. Bring God into confidence and, although you may feel at times that you're talking to the wall, let me assure you that God *is* listening!

Ashamed

There is no surprise here. Guilt is a human reaction to mistakes (That is the gentlest way I can say it). And these struggles more often than not attach to some relationship we are hurting over. If we were living all alone on separate islands, there probably would be no issue. It is the dynamic of a relationship that reminds us of these shortfalls in our makeup. It is a good guess that we all have them—at least one character flaw or weakness—that highlights the difficulty each of us has in merging our personality with another's into one relationship.

Sometimes we excuse inappropriate behavior as something everyone is doing or something we maintain is a source of our happiness. We excuse some behavior as sickness or a symptom of some trauma. But we know that all along we are damaging a special relationship with someone we love. And that someone always includes God since He desires to be involved in our happiness and healthy relations.

We want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to continue to misbehave hoping that we can continue to sustain a healthy relationship with someone we love dearly. But we know intuitively, not because we have religious training and not because we read books, that this isn't working. If you think about it, this is why we

invented the word “sorry.”

Passions that are in fact temptations to do or say things we later are sorry for doing or saying are not readily or quickly dealt with—else they would not be temptations. They would be one-off setbacks and of little consequence in the scope of things. But here I am talking about those actions that we cannot seem to discipline ourselves away from. Here I am talking about things we do that hurt those we purport to love.

In short, because we are so vulnerable to wrong decisions, we need some level of counseling, some friendly ear, that can accept us as we are and as we work through these issues. God makes an excellent—the Bible calls Him a ‘wonderful’—counselor.

Said a simpler way: over the years I have fallen into this crestfallen state and have found it worth my effort to tell God just how I felt.

Already Forgiven

God forgiving me was never an issue. The Bible is clear on this point. I may have a problem forgiving myself, but God has no problem here.

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34

His forgiveness on the Cross of Calvary was all inclusive. Beside, why would He advice us to forgive someone 490 times¹⁷³ if necessary and He wouldn't!? Our theology affirms that God is all knowing, so with Him there could be no surprise that here we are again, sorry for

¹⁷³ Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

something we did or said.

Truth be told: neither should I be surprised when I struggle with some guilt, I would seem less human *not* to have this issue. But the hope is that there will come a day when this will no longer be an issue in my life. To this end every believer should be praying.

Manasseh

I have to mention Manasseh. This king was a creep, a first class example of pure evil. Manasseh was the worst of the worst. He condoned infant sacrifice, desecrated the Jewish Temple, not to mention the usual evils wicked kings tend to be known for. The story in-between is a lifetime of evil: infanticide, and a nation in mourning, political upheaval and war.¹⁷⁴

He [Manasseh, the Judean king] sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger. He took the image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever."¹⁷⁵

Was Hitler worse? We want to think so because this reprobate snake-in-the-grass, Manasseh, asked God to

¹⁷⁴ Robert Girdlestone in *Synonyms of the Old Testament*. p 76 wrote: "The pictorial power of the Hebrew language is seldom exhibited more clearly than in connection with the various aspects of evil. Every word is a piece of philosophy; nay, it is a revelation. The observer of human affairs is painfully struck by the wearisomeness of life, and by the amount of toil and travail which the children of men have to undergo to obtain a bare existence; he sees the hollowness, vanity, and unreality of much that seems bright and charming at first; ... The Hebrew Bible meets us with a full acknowledgement of these manifold aspects of human suffering, and blends wrong doing and suffering to a remarkable degree, setting forth sin in its relation to God, to society, and to a man's own self.."

¹⁷⁵ 2 Chronicles 33:6-10.

forgive him ...and God did!!

In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem, and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God.¹⁷⁶

Manasseh finally found himself captive to a life he never dreamed possible, a life from which he now cried unto God to free him. Manasseh was a tyrant who committed atrocities and we would not think him worthy of forgiveness, but with God no one is denied mercy if they, with an honest heart, seek it of Him.

And to rub salt into the wound for those who think Manasseh undeserving of God's attention: God restored him to the Judean throne.

Talk to God about all the things you can do to mess up your own life and the lives of those you love. He listens and can do something about all of this.

My need for Mercy.

There have been issues in my life that I brought before the Lord almost on a daily basis. I was very repetitious in what I said. Each time before Him in prayer was an honest desire to deal with who I was and who I wanted to be instead. And if I needed His mercy on a daily basis, according to the prophet Jeremiah, I got it!

Because of the Lord's great love [mercy] we are not consumed, for his compassions¹⁷⁷ never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

I pause here to repeat the premise behind everything I am writing here. When I talk to God about my own

¹⁷⁶ 2 Chronicles 33:11-12.

¹⁷⁷ Lamentations 3:22-23.

failings, my own struggles, angst, or fears on such an ongoing basis, I am in the presence of the most amazing counselor and if over the course of many prayers I find myself getting insight into my situation, becoming more adapt at dealing successfully with whatever troubles me, learning to forgive myself and others, I can safely say that God was there with me and for me.

And this is were I am now coming to in old age. It might be argued that, of course, now in old age I am less tempted. Temptation is a challenge of the youth who are still forming their futures and working their dreams and searching for healthy relationships. The youth are more likely to stumble along taking risks and trying new things. We old folk just sit in the easy chair of our memories and ponder the past. These are settled matters for septuagenarians—at least you would think. This is not totally correct since we have not died nor lost our humanity. If anything is true, we are more transparent, less adapt at hiding feelings and not emotionally strong enough to be carrying the heavy burden that lying and deceiving others would heave on us.

I need no philosophical argument or new science to prove how real God is—to *me*, when my life has been this constant walk with Him while I shared my deepest feelings. The Bible, also, is full of good counsel and I have discovered that from time to time this verse or that one offers genuine insight into my situation. (Of course, I have to read it!) I credit this, too, to God.

* * *

God is Not Mocked

“God cannot be mocked,” Saint Paul warned in the Bible.¹⁷⁸

Sometimes people use counselors for validation or support. Never fear, God is not vulnerable to such human scheming. When talking to God, I can be brutally honest with Him as to how I feel or how I see a situation. I don't need to pretend. And since God, for the most part, is a listener it is futile for me to attempt to dissuade Him from doing what He in mercy intends to do ...or persuade Him to zap someone whom I think deserves it.

Bonafide institutions set up to help addicts require those addicted to something harmful to first *want* to be helped. Why should it be different with God? No one is successfully dragged screaming and kicking to get such help because part of all help is self-help. The Bible word is *repentance*, a concept that is only practiced with much penitence and confession. (Think of the 12 steps of any anonymous program.) God knows how the process works and we can talk to Him about it in the privacy of that lone hour when only He need hear us.

Just As I Am

Travis Cottrell, a well known American contemporary Christian music songwriter and worship leader insightfully added a refrain to the invitational song, “*Just As I Am*,” made memorable over the years by the Billy Graham Crusade Choir.

I come broken to be mended
I come wounded to be healed
I come desperate to be rescued

¹⁷⁸ Galatians 6:7

I come empty to be filled
I come guilty to be pardoned
By the blood of Christ the Lamb
And I'm welcomed with open arms
Praise God, just as I am

Is this not the sum of the matter when we need God? ... when other sources of counsel prove insufficient to guide us through a grief too overwhelming, a guilt too painful, a sorrow too crushing, a heart broken beyond the expertise of man's knowledge to mend?

We need to talk to God!

The Psalmist

The Psalmist, King David, is an example from the Bible of someone seeking God to assuage the guilt that torments. David had an affair with another man's wife and then because she was carrying his child and he was the King, he had her husband, Uriah, murdered to cover it up. Uriah was left alone during one fierce battle while the general, Joab, of David's army gave an unexpected command to retreat—just as David planned it. There was no hope of survival for Uriah without his comrades on his six.

Let the record show that:

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, "Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die."¹⁷⁹

This is not a pretty story but a tale of humanity at its worse. And David was called out on it. Nathan, the prophet, after speaking to the king, must have spoken to a reporter because it made the headlines. It's in our Bible.

David sought an audience with God fearing that the damage this might have caused to his relationship with

¹⁷⁹ 2 Samuel 11:14-15.

God might be irreparable. David's 51st Psalm is his prayer of desperation, his cry for restitution, and the anguish of an honest heart—which God always accepts. This is one of many Psalms that bares the soul of the Psalmist and allows us to eavesdrop on one of his most vulnerable moments while he seeks God's merciful intervention.¹⁸⁰

It is correct to say that here is the record of a humbled humanity emotionally naked before the only one who can address such a depth of self-inflicted pain. The harm David has caused both to himself and to others is incalculable. Here is the confession of his fear of losing God's listening ear, of having to live the rest of his life carrying this crushing guilt. He was emotionally bankrupt, unable to feel happiness, unable to know joy or love. David's soul longed to roll back the clock to a more innocent time, to a

¹⁸⁰ Psalm 51 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

time before he did what he did. He felt “dirty” on the inside and longed for God to clean his heart and his thoughts.

David discovered that there is a level of emotional pain that only God’s peace is capable of alleviating.

"I trusted in the Lord when I said, "I am greatly afflicted."¹⁸¹

He requested God would never forget this moment of mercy, for, a God who does not forget mercy, is a God who now has set up a precedent to always be so:

Psalms 56:8 Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll [Another translation: Save my tears in a bottle.]¹⁸²

Ultimately, David knew that he would be right back where he was—when another man’s wife was so tempting—if God didn’t change him, give him a heart that was impassioned to follow truth and right. From years of experiencing the ups and downs of his own conscience, living out the principles he sought to so desperately honor and then again failing so miserably to honor them, he knew that only God could level the ground beneath him, keep him from stumbling along and finally strengthen him to walk the path before God as he so longed to.

Hold me up, that I may be safe and have regard for your statutes continually!¹⁸³

Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths.¹⁸⁴

The Rest of the Story

There are two other parts to this story well worth the mentioning. The narrative suggests that David might have been content to hide his indiscretion since no one knew—

¹⁸¹ Psalms 116:10 .

¹⁸² King James Version.

¹⁸³ Psalms 119:117 .

¹⁸⁴ Psalms 25:4.

of course, the widow, Bathsheba, knew what had really happened or whose baby she carried. It was the perfect murder. But God knew and the prophet Nathan became the voice of conscience to the king.¹⁸⁵ David immediately confessed his guilt and this Psalm has been voiced by many over the centuries. David put into simple language an anguish that in reality exceeds the power of words to describe. But God can read hearts!

It would have been better had David moved on his own to confess all this to God but he needed to be prodded a bit, pushed in that direction. It all sounds—just what it is—perfectly human.

The second part worth mentioning is David's use of a word which somehow was assigned to the English word "sin" for meaning. This is not an easy assignment since in the Bible it had a special meaning—we call it a nuance. It was not without reason that David confessed, "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.*"¹⁸⁶ I am sure God was not the only one David offended or hurt, but up until it became public knowledge, he and Bathsheba were the only two who knew the real story. Family and friends, which included a battalion of brave men, were grieving the loss of a friend but they mourned Uriah as a casualty of war.

What do you think of David now! His offense had far reaching effects. Whatever "sin" is, God wasn't the only one he needed to tell he was sorry! We can spin this a thousand ways but the fact still remains that there are consequences that show up, sometimes, years afterward. Bathsheba had a boy. He didn't live. And some terrible

¹⁸⁵ 2 Samuel 12.

¹⁸⁶ Psalms 51:4.

things happened in the aftermath that no one in this story—I surmise—would have guessed. As a direct result of this unconscionable act of treachery, when their affair became headline news because David was the nation's leader, their night of passion had unexpected consequences.

Sons tend to follow fathers. The history of David's progeny, consequently, is in part a narrative worthy a crime drama riddled with civil war, covert activity, murder and rape, but it must be told because it is the story of guilt and the pain inflicted on a family and on a nation. David as well, found himself constantly at war with the neighboring nations.¹⁸⁷ We might say that eventually—and inevitably—with God David found peace, the eye of the storm, but his world was still living in the swirling winds this single tragedy was reported to have caused.

Tempted

At times, I needed His peace after I lost it through yielding to some temptation. It helped to know I was not alone in this struggle. Even Jesus was tempted, according to the

¹⁸⁷ 2 Samuel 12:10-11. Does the punishment fit the crime!? Worse still was the debauchery a single night of passion and moral indiscretion gone public brought on the entire nation, "This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight.'"

NOTE: God takes full responsibility for allowing such consequences to David's one night of passion. Atheism jumps on this account to point out how unfair the Judeo-Christian God appears in the text and by my saying God "allowed" instead of "caused" these consequences, they are accusing me of spinning it beyond the simple meaning of the words. The greater point is that there is a moral truth about the harm of promiscuity that modern times no longer sees important.

Bible.¹⁸⁸

But temptations are not for public consumption. After all, they are things we yield to in some very private settings. If I had shared mine with anyone else, if they weren't appalled, they might have rolled their eyes and smiled.

I shared them with God. He is simply concerned about me. A good promise to keep in mind is what Jesus' brother, James, said,

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.¹⁸⁹

I remember one night while working at a local hotel as a janitor, I came upon a playboy magazine and must admit, I was curious—curious is a gentle term which fails to admit the real desire lurking in the emotional shadows of my psyche. I brought this to the attention of one of the christian women working there and she blurted out, "Just don't look!"¹⁹⁰ This was easy for her to say. Maybe she struggled with gossiping, though—I don't know that for sure. To me she seemed perfect, but just maybe that was her weakness and I could just as easily have told her, "Just keep your mouth shut!"

I have discovered during these counseling sessions with the Lord that I am vulnerable in areas I never thought I would be. I have no desire to smoke weed (now it's legal) or to get drunk but every once and a while in a moment of heightened emotional ire I will say things I shouldn't. I need to go into a situation knowing ahead of time that this

¹⁸⁸ Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

¹⁸⁹ James 1:5.

¹⁹⁰ Did I look? What would you have done? That's what I did!

is a possibility and decide to be silent. It is when I am surprised I tend to get verbally reckless.

And then there was that magazine. We had missionaries visit the church during the publication of Jessica Hahn 's deposition in Playboy. The missionary wanted to have his wife purchase the magazine and read the article to us. When he left our home, he left the magazine for me to dispose of. I didn't need this! The story was also in the Washington Post but the devil didn't want us to know that!

Yielding to temptation is not a simple one off. Temptations are not isolated incidences that I might yield to and then go on my way like nothing ever happened or will ever happen again as a consequence. Not only it is possible to get entrapped but the impact they have on one's relationships can be catastrophic.

I have over the years as a pastor counseled with many regarding sexual indiscretions. I have helped individuals pick up the pieces of their relationships after the devastation of an affair. I have patiently prayed with some persons dealing with guilt and shame. And these have all been believers which deserved a chance by God's grace to press the restart button of life.

I cannot say it enough: temptations in whatever form, are matters for God and talk to Him, we must! The Bible recognizes that we all have this human weakness in common in one form or another.¹⁹¹ Believers are not exempt. These are forms of human behavior we decry

¹⁹¹ I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

when seen in others but which we might do in secret and tell ourselves in denial that this is not us. It helps, always, to be truthful with God about it.

Just for the record: the devil has no future and he doesn't want you or me to have one either. A temptation is not a planned activity; it is an emotion driven event that has no logical component. It is all feeling and no brain. It is only "now" with no thought for "then what." The Bible uses the term "lust." Jesus' brother, James, cautions,

Then, after desire [lust] has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.¹⁹²

But what is sin?

When a Sin is a Sin

So, what is "sin"?

This question needs asking because religious people tend to define it whatever way gives them the advantage over their social connections or whatever makes them feel closer to holiness or better about themselves. Many "sins" are the pure inventions of religious persons that profess not to commit them. It is generally something others do—not them! Some think that sin is connected to an antiquated religion, a moral code no longer in use. Or others use this word on themselves being overwhelmed with an unbearable sense of shame. Sin becomes the bully of all bullies and the consequence of this can be deadly to a relationship.

Our understanding of sin should not be so relaxed and flippant as to have no meaning, nor should it be so devastating that peace is no longer an option.

¹⁹² James 1:15.

Our understanding of sin should lead us to a conversation with God. That is the purpose for this word in the Bible. Sin is any act that somehow adversely effects our relationship with God. We need to talk to God about it. Like in any relationship when we do something that harms that relationship, we need, all the more, to do something about it. We need to talk to them about it.

And we need to be talking to God about anything we might do that by its very nature has erected this barrier between us. We need to tear it down by sharing all our feelings, including our shame, with Him in an honest interest in His mercy and our wanting to repair the damage we have caused by what we did. David understood this and for that reason, notwithstanding his humanity and his faults, God knew him to be a friend.

I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do. - Acts 13:22

Sin

Christians tend to see temptation itself as a “sin” but it is the *yielding* to it that leads to “sinning” and then only when we are tempted to do something which is actually a *sin* (To do something that negatively impacts our relationship with God). If we believe in the tempter, the Devil, Satan (and I do) he is not interested in getting us to make some isolated mistake but in getting us to do something that impacts our future. That’s what is particularly devilish and crafty behind his motive—to push over the first domino in the row. There are unforeseen consequences.

If I am tempted to eat a few more potato chips when I know it will ruin my appetite, dinner will be ready soon, I don’t think this is a question of “sinning.” If we are going

to say that when we are tempted we are being pulled by a desire to do something “sinful,” we need to make sure we know what “sin” is.¹⁹³

If you are like me there are probably a few things you have done that someone told you were sinful and they weren't. The shame you carried was unfortunate. These are things to talk over with the Lord. You'll be surprised how He can clear up these matters for you.

Allied with Prayer

Over the years prayer has been an ally in the war against self-imposed guilt which plotted to take me prisoner through the foolish things I had done. In some microcosmic sense perhaps (although sin is sin) I have oft rewritten David's 51st Psalm in my own thoughts and words. I would share with God what I was feeling. I reported my progress daily to God and gave Him realtime updates on my feelings and reactions. I brought Him into my confidence. Each time I yielded to the tempter's trickery, knowing how little power he really had over me, had me running back to God in prayer.¹⁹⁴

I needed someone to help me when my trust in my fellow man had been seriously diminished. Life gets complicated when the very persons who might help are the same persons you need to learn to forgive. I became all the more cautious about sharing when hidden among my acquaintances, I feared, were the enemy's moles, grapevine

¹⁹³ James 1:14-15 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

¹⁹⁴ It was in this context I had the dream I wrote about in the appendix.

operatives who liked to analyze and discuss the troubles of others.

A good support group or fellowship group is to be appreciated. A good friend is special. Yet, who could counsel me, if not God? Who could I expect to listen without rebuking me or showing surprise, or wanting to give me bad advice?

What was worse, some of my temptations were habitual return offenders. I took God up on that seventy times seven comment. I needed Him to forgive me often. And I knew He did. The apostle John philosophized,

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.¹⁹⁵

Realizing God's complete and unconditional love for me I lost the fear of being judged. Too often, I am embarrassed to confess, I would beg God to "*lead me not into temptation,*" as He advised I pray.¹⁹⁶ And I really meant it, over and over and over again. I really meant it. But yet I didn't live it.

Guilt was not the only vanguard for my soul's enemies. Doubt, fear and grief also were part of an ongoing assault against my faith. There was much I was never sure of. I had lost the desire to debate eternal matters and we live in an age of skepticism about spiritual things. I had my anxieties also about the immediate future. Worries often accompanied my thoughts about those I love. And there is so much I miss about yesteryear. I spoke often to God about all these.

I never saw myself much different than other believers who shared with me their worse fears. I thought myself in

¹⁹⁵ I John 4:18.

¹⁹⁶ see The Lord's Prayer. Matthew 6:13.

some ways blessed having known a few “saints” whose burdens were far heavier than mine and might have crushed me. I saw God in their lives and knew He could be in mine, too.

Talking to God makes a difference. Over the years I have learned much about myself, my strengths and my weaknesses, my natural inclinations, my real interests, my real needs separate from my wants. I have come to know myself better. I have come to value some past decisions I thought then were mistakes and reevaluate much of my past in a changed perspective on life. Also in these conversational moments with God I found a way to sift through past hurts and find forgiveness. And with an undebatable clarity I have found a deeper love and closeness to family. Above all this, I have found my faith a more cherished friend in this postmodern world. Oh, and yes, I think, perhaps, I sin less these days.

Understanding God

What do you think a parent might do if you and I were high on illegal drugs or drunk when we visited? Of course, you understand that heartbroken they would turn us away or the visit would turn into a lecture on the evils of our ways. And no one would wonder what got into them that they should be so put out with someone they dearly loved. Everyone would somehow intuitively understand that it would be wrong to invade the sanctity of their home with behavior that painfully breaks the sacred trust by which they order their own world.¹⁹⁷

There is no fear that you or I would do such a thing. The reason for painting this grim picture is to point out that all of us tend to see our own domain, how we live, as the expression of certain principles that define who we are in relation to others. We live by rules, some of which are as personal and as individual as ourselves. "Rules" is such a weak term. The traditions that shape our concept of right from wrong, the spontaneous reactions to life, are so much a part of who we are, they have no clear definition. They can only be described, ultimately, as "*me*," who I am. Each of us wants to create a home around us in the shape of our conscience and our understanding of what is reasonable to bring us ultimate happiness. Each of us wants to find that cone of silence to muffle the voices of opposition and change that are ever part of the outside world. Each of us

¹⁹⁷ Doctor Walter Beuttler trumpeted the message of the Presence of God. Some of his teachings have been published to Youtube. see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyAXy4Dmd90&list=PLhDLfZf_WSzCkn9c8h0VqQMW0aRvz373m
see also <http://walterbeuttler.com/>

wants to kick our shoes off and scratch where it itches without needing to explain ourselves. We recognize that this retreat is as unique in some respects as we are because we made it so. It is a creation of our need to know ourselves. This is our heaven and God has His.

This “*me*,” this quintessential person I am becoming or that I am, is my *KODESH*. I choose this word because it resembles a Hebrew word found in the Bible that best serves to explain what I am talking about—only it is a word used primarily about God—*His* *KODESH* or *His holiness*. Scholarship says that this word (holiness) “*indeed, ...contains the innermost description of God’s nature.*”¹⁹⁸

Isaiah

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.¹⁹⁹

In a vision, the prophet Isaiah, upon the death of the Judean King, Uzziah, took note that God was still enthroned—this while the nation mourned. Uzziah had reigned for 52 years, the last four as a victim of leprosy which finally took his life. (Leprosy was often considered a form of divine judgment.) Generations were born and many, no doubt, died never knowing another king. The nation, little doubt, was now disquieted after decades of unprecedented political stability.

Over the tragedy of the king’s death, Isaiah began warning of the inevitable destruction of the nation in a

¹⁹⁸ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol I. p 100.

¹⁹⁹ Isaiah 6:1.

time of war, prophesying, “*The land is utterly forsaken,*”²⁰⁰ the consequence of a nation that has forsaken God. In turn, God now is about to forsake them.

Reverend Chuck Smith explains, “*God had to remove [Isaiah’s] idol Uzziah before His prophet could see Him.*”²⁰¹ Perhaps, this was true—more so—for the nation. God was their real King above Uzziah.

So, an angel heralded some good news. The angel didn’t bring a message of hope as if to say the future looked brighter. Such a message would fly in the face of Isaiah’s stern warning. The angel spoke to current events. In reality the king of Judea had not died at all since God was their King. Nor had God abdicated His throne. “*Long live the King!!*” Or in the words of the angel,

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty²⁰²

Scholarship explains,

Holiness and glory thus combine to express the essence of the Godhead, and a holy awe permeates the whole scene.²⁰³

All that God is, all that He has ever been and in all ways He is yet to reveal Himself—this God—is alive, gloriously present, to rule over us! God is the Sovereign in Judea and in the church.

God's Glory

The prophet envisioned God’s glory as a “train,” His robe, trailing behind Him as He walked and was seated on His throne. The vision enhances the imagery. Not only is God

²⁰⁰ Isaiah 6:12.

²⁰¹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/SermonNotes_Isa/Isa_4.cfm?a=685001

²⁰² Isaiah 6:3.

²⁰³ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol I. p 100.

holy but He is gloriously so. All that God is in essence, in His nature, in His being, is said to be glorious, blindingly bright, such that in our humanness the glow of His presence, His holiness, not only exceeds our ability to comprehend who He really is but—His holiness—requires a change in us before we can see Him and live. It was this glorious display of God in His regal apparel that suddenly overwhelmed the prophet with the hidden reality of a Holy God still in charge of his nation’s history—and ours.

I am reminded of another instance when Moses became curious enough to ask if God would show Himself. Moses really did not know what he was asking for but God sought to oblige him in some limited way. The story continues,

But, [The Lord] said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”²⁰⁴

In some ways, I imagine, this is our story, too. In this life we should want to know God even in some limited way.

Seeing God

This is the God we are praying to. This is the God from whom we are asking favors when we bombard Him with our list of needs and wants.

When Jesus, who was the Son of God, came to earth, He had to tone down His divine nature. The bible uses the word “kenosis” meaning “emptied” or as another translation says it: *He made Himself nothing*. Although He was God, the Apostle Paul revealed,

²⁰⁴ Exodus 33:20-23.

in very nature God, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.²⁰⁵

He, according to the Apostle John was the incomprehensible light the shown in the darkness of our human nature.²⁰⁶ This analogy shows the divide, the total incompatibility, between who God is and our humanity.

God spoke to Hosea, another prophet, blurting out, “*I am God, and not man, the **Holy One** among you....*”²⁰⁷

There is the story of Jesus with two of the ancients loved in Israel, Moses and Elijah, discussing—we can only surmise—His upcoming death. Three disciples: Peter, James and John looked on in awe; for,

As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.²⁰⁸

For one brief moment, the veil that hid Jesus’ true nature slipped down and three followers got a glimpse of the hidden reality Jesus labored under for our redemption.²⁰⁹

The Hebrew word *Qaron* [kä·ran’] meaning “shone” reminds me of the English term “corona,” that glow that encircles our sun and which we dare not try to look at with the naked eye. {That’s a footnote I just had to put in the text.}

We cannot appreciate right now the challenge God’s heart took on to make a way for us to commune with Him, to see Him as He really is. This is the God who wants to call us “friend” No wonder Jesus called anyone pure enough and sinless enough truly bless to be able to look

²⁰⁵ Philippians 2:6-7.

²⁰⁶ John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

²⁰⁷ Hosea 11:9.

²⁰⁸ Luke 9:29.

²⁰⁹ Exodus 34:35 they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

upon Him.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.²¹⁰

This is a blessing yet to come.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears [when he is made known], we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.²¹¹

Holiest of All

There is in the Bible narrative the story of a multilayered curtain, about a meter thick, covering the entrance to the Holy of Holies. This account is beaming with symbolism useful in explaining what I have been struggling to relate. There was an inner chamber or room in the Jewish Tabernacle, and later the Temple, where only the High Priest entered once yearly by appointment. This was called the "*Holiest of all.*"²¹²

Only once each year and only the High Priest could enter this room. No one else was permitted such an audience with a Holy God. The Bible writer explains:

that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing;²¹³

Until Jesus through His death and resurrection tore the curtain away²¹⁴ no one was given continuous excess to an audience with God. But while He was dying on the Cross, during an earthquake, the curtain was ripped from its moorings. The Apostle explains,

²¹⁰ Matthew 5:8.

²¹¹ I John 3:2.

²¹² Hebrew 9:3 And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all;
vs 7 But into the second went the high priest alone once every year
see Exodus 25:10-16; 28:35.

²¹³ Hebrews 9:8.

²¹⁴ Mark 15:38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,²¹⁵

For most readers this is probably old news—but good news. Here I remind us of the challenge God faced when He decided to invite us into His world. We weren't "pure." We were like drug using teens to God's parenting skills and to us He seemed impossibly unreasonable and demanding. We would enjoy the promised benefits but wanted none of the responsibilities. We would live in His blessings but without requiring us to change ...and this could never be!

God 's Kodesh

God's KODESH has always been understood to be God's "holiness" but it is not a set of rules or some anti-sin principle. It is not some religious culture or ritual. It is far more, and far different. His KODESH is simply who He is.

It is when we see God's relationship with us as a set of laws that we are flummoxed when God doesn't seem to follow our understanding of those laws. For example: the Apostle Paul reminds us that. "...as it is written: '*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*'"²¹⁶ I thought God was a God of love!

We never would attribute "hate" to a God of love. How confusing a statement from the Bible that would require many a clergy to go through theological contortions to explain. And yet think about it. This truth wraps the expression of God's grace in common language from the human perspective. God's choice, His grace, is not based

²¹⁵ Hebrews 10:19.

²¹⁶ Romans 9:13. Malachi 1:2,3. I have loved you ... And I hated Esau.

on favor deserved. Jacob loved was Jacob chosen as the patriarch of the Jewish nation. Esau was not, even though, he was the first born and deserved it by Jewish law.

Or consider when the prophet Jeremiah asks *“Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities [evil] and good things come?”*²¹⁷ We would yell out, *“Only the good!”* We even have an antiphonal response to this:

Speaker: God is good.

People: All the time.

Speaker: And all the time

People: God is good.

We even set this to music.²¹⁸ But Ezekiel corrects us *“... they will know that I am the LORD; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity [evil] on them.”*²¹⁹

We have in effect through our religious interests invited ourselves into God’s world while continuing all those practices [like the drugs and drink illustrated earlier] that are that part of our humanity that is offensive to God. Many, I can assume, attend church regularly but continue to do things clearly ethically and morally wrong—and sinful.

God is holy; without Him in our lives, we are not holy! We are not like Him and, without getting to know Him, we could never come to appreciate His thoughts and actions in our world. Our life styles and actions come into direct conflict with God’s KODESH. Who He is cannot be brought into a rich and abiding fellowship with what we have become. And although Christ has provided the means now through the Cross to become a different

²¹⁷ Lamentations 3:38.

²¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gt-OouIx8Lk>

²¹⁹ Ezekiel 6:10.

person, we need to avail ourselves of this provision. Sin is nothing more or less than doing things that hurt our relationship with God, that spit in the face of who He is and how He runs His heaven, how He orders His world.

Our focus in prayer should be on a continuous desire that God might show us His mercy and grace, that we might have a heart after His heart and a life that more and more pleases Him.

He is Who He is

Getting to know God's KODESH is getting to know God, Himself.

So, how should God react to what His creation does? What should we expect God to do about us and how we react to temptations? Suffice it to say that God is full of surprises. And, for those who love Him, they are all good.²²⁰ As all christians should know, He provided a way for us to get to know and fellowship with Him through Christ's life, death, and resurrection (that first Easter morning).

Holiness is not just an idea, then, or a life free from a list of vices we have determined are vices. Holiness is not a religious term as if we can claim to be holy because we are going to church weekly, or giving money to the church or have not said a bad word in over a year. There is no law of

²²⁰ Isaiah 64:4 "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him." which Paul interprets to mean (1 Corinthians 2:9) *What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him.*

holiness.²²¹ Holiness is the divine person; it is how God acts and thinks and works. As scholarship concluded:

KODESH comes to have the meaning of divine, and thus becomes an adjective for God.²²²

Be Ye Holy

When we pray, in a sense, we are showing up at God's front door, knocking. And we anticipate His opening the door for us.²²³ But what we may fail to appreciate is that when God opens to us, He is still God, as scary as that might sound. The prophet Isaiah upon hearing the angel celebrating the holiness of God testified, "'Woe to me! ... I am ruined!'"²²⁴ He didn't come into God's world drunk, but he might as well have. He was suddenly unable to find the words to say while God stood there ready to invite him in.

This entire account is an analogy, first, for prayer, you understand. But it serves to point out how ill prepared we are to request an audience with God and how God recognizes this without compromising Himself to our way of life. As God commanded through Moses,

I am the LORD your God; ... be holy, because I am holy.²²⁵

We won't change God or get Him to compromise who He is. He must change us! So an angel, one of the "seraphim," (they set fires which is a symbol for judgment) came with a hot coal and purified Isaiah's lips so that he

²²¹ Galatians 5:23 says of the Fruit of the Spirit: "*Against such things there is no law.*"

²²² Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol I.. p 90.

²²³ Luke 11:9 knock and the door will be opened to you.

²²⁴ Isaiah 6:5

²²⁵ Leviticus 11:44

would not be offensive to God when he spoke.²²⁶ This did not only apply to the prophet's ministry to Israel—that he might say the right thing as God would instruct him—but, I want to say, also his prayer life would become more powerful and effectual. Isaiah records,

With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."²²⁷

If we want God to grant us an audience and hear us, doesn't it make sense that we should be aware of the relationship and what it means to our partner? If theology is going to serve us at all should it not inspire us to know God? The Apostle Paul trumpeted, "*I want to know Christ —yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings.*"²²⁸ Paul wanted to live in such a way that Christ's highest high and lowest low and everything in-between would become a part also of who he was. Paul's intimacy with Christ gave his prayer life a dynamic and a voice it would never have had if he remained selfishly distant from or ignorant of what Jesus' death and resurrection meant.

We are encouraged to endeavor to know God more intimately in prayer, to pursue holiness. Such an awareness is not an academic pursuit but a lifestyle on our part that makes God's approach to life more and more our own—more reasonable and fulfilling! It makes sense to be like Him, even in a stumbling, fumbling way. His ways will make more sense to us if we are trying to live them. David was a man with a heart after God's. And we, too,

²²⁶ Isaiah would be God's chosen ambassador in Judea. For this He needed to have God's message and for this He needed to know how to talk to God—pray.

²²⁷ Isaiah 6:7

²²⁸ Philippians 3:10.

must discover what this means. As he prayed,

Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.²²⁹

As we become like Him, prayer takes on a more dynamic awareness of God. Hope is more alive and faith stronger! A conversation with God about our problems becomes more and more a cherished opportunity because our interests begin to line up with His own for us.²³⁰ What troubles us most becomes less of self and more what God wants.

So Many Lists

Is there a short cut to holiness? Is there a reasonable, “not-too-big-a-challenge” way to have my KODESH line up more with God’s so that praying will have more meaning to me and I will feel less like I am talking to the wall?

No!

Praying is a conversation with God—and not some well written or thought out, carefully worded, ritual. How can I get a clearer sense of this kind of praying, if I want? Is there a punch list of do’s and don’ts that once practiced make me holy? What about the ten commandments?²³¹ Surely, these define a holy life if I am following them!

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; ...
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for

²²⁹ Psalms 25:4-5.

²³⁰ Psalms 37:4 Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

²³¹ Exodus 20:3-17.

the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ...
5. Honor your father and your mother, ...
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Or what about—what is known in the Bible as the fruit of the Spirit? Surely, here is the mark of holiness.

love, joy, peace, forbearance,²³² kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Or is there a clue in the beatitudes²³³ of being more acknowledging of God's holiness and, therefore, enjoying a far richer friendship with God in prayer?

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Well, yes, indeed, to all of the above, but an academic exercise, a bible study alone, is not the answer because somewhere in all these Bible lists are divine attributes that need to become a part of us as children of God—like

²³² Galatians 5:22-23. see my work "Jots & Tittles" for more detail.

²³³ Matthew 5:3-10. I write about the Beatitudes in "*The Dream*"

Father, like son and daughter. There is a bible word well known to the church that sums this all up: *sanctification*. This should be the spontaneous expression of who we are becoming through prayer. All God expects is that we want to be more like Him (the 4th Beatitude), that we hunger and thirst for righteousness. Doctor Beuttler used to say, “*We have to want to want to.*”

Sometimes, holiness is observable in another christian who might be godly and therefore someone we might wish to emulate.

Dr. Osgood

In Bible college my understanding of all things spiritual was impacted by our choir director. We were rehearsing through the semester to sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel’s *Messiah* at graduation, but as students tend to be, we were not serious. We already made one director quit—probably, for sanity’s sake. But here came Reverend Osgood who would not be so moved out of the way. It was not that we wanted faculty members to leave (well, there was one, but that’s another story). We were just young and foolish and—let’s face it—*Handel’s Messiah!*

Doctor Osgood’s patience with us was unassailable. One practice while we were chattering away like seagulls on the beach—and he could probably get the birds’ attention easier than ours—he let out a loud screech. Not quite a scream as if he wanted to cry or kill (well, kill ...maybe), it was an attention getter, after which, moving his baton back and forth while pointing it directly at us, leaning forward into the microphone, he quietly confessed that had he been holding a machine gun instead of a baton he would have

(quote) “*mowed us all down.*” That was all there was to his rage. He returned to conducting and teaching us this beautiful piece which we sang at commencement to a standing ovation.

Doctor Osgood’s patience, his forbearance, his love for us and the music ministry, his gentle voice even in his anger made me sit up straight and take notice. WOW! I wanted what Doctor Osgood had! I wanted to be like that! I think I was getting a glimpse of God’s heart toward me more than the good teacher’s toward us. These two observations merged into one and I learned that there is a strength of patience and love that endures, that cannot be defeated, that extends beyond the offense. God had it ... and Doctor Howard Osgood had it, too!! I think I understood the divine heart a little better because of him.

Doctor Osgood’s prayer life, no doubt, was his source of strength to lead us.

Prayer

There is this undeniable relation between holiness and prayer, between my becoming more like God and my ongoing conversation with Him, between God’s KODESH and me. The more I appreciate His great heart and what He does and permits to happen in my life, the more my prayer time contributes to my sense of happiness, the more I cherish these private talks with God.

The flower of holiness only grows in the soil of ceaseless prayer. Somehow, my desire to be more like Him is happening slowly but discernibly while I commune with Him in that peaceful retreat. The dynamics of relationship are such that one cannot get to know another without face

time. Reading an autobiography—the Bible in God’s case—is insufficient alone to bring us into such a relationship. We need to get to know the author not just by reading about Him but also through meeting with Him.

I Don't Need a Plumber

We sometimes forget in our desperation that God has designs upon our lives not always congruous with our own. He wants to continue the process of molding us, working the clay of our personhood, into someone He can communicate His love and grace to more fully. Is it possible that our despondency over foiled plans actually gets a thumbs up from God? We want things: blessings and all things easy. This may become a problem when it comes to prayer. We may need to revisit our past since we began talking to God about these matters and readjust our perspective.

I really wanted to be a textual critic—so I say! But I came to this conclusion years *after* Bible college when I discovered there was such a discipline taught in the seminaries. What I really wanted to do was teach and since I had a love for the Bible I wanted to teach the Bible; so, I went into pastoring. But that's not exactly right either. You see, I came to this conclusion *after* I was booted out of two separate ministries because my administrative skills were lacking and my theology was described as "vague." So, here I am now looking back and typing about it.

"Did I ever ask God to open this door or that one for me?" You ask.

Actually ... no. But I have talked and talked and talked and talked to Him about all this. I guess I left the actual decision as to what to do with me up to Him.

"Why the title of this chapter: I Don't Need a Plumber"? You ask.

Think about it. It's metaphorical. The point is I don't need God to be a plumber. I need Him to be my Creator, my Judge, and my Savior. These are the things He is good at. But we get it in our heads—and hearts, unfortunately—that because He is the Great I AM of Scripture, because He is omnipotent (this is our theological term for "Almighty"), we can ask Him to do anything—even stuff He never promised, never intended, and never wanted to do. If I could get God to give me anything in prayer, if "in faith believing" meant I could have anything, I have turned God into a genie in a bottle. Father Donovan was on to something when he reported,

Our God is often more descriptive of a pagan concept of god, a god who favors us and our interests, one we pray to in that regard.²³⁴

So, if you need a plumber, call a plumber, but if you need God, call on Him! But keep in mind what He is all about and what is in His tool kit. Some people don't want God in their lives because they do know, at least in some limited sense, what He is about and they do not want that. But some of us have discovered that while talking to God and subsequently getting to know Him we *do* want Him in our lives. And if you want Him, He will be there! Count on it!

Creator

When I read Father Donovan's distinction between "*a continuing creation*" vs. "*a closed or finished creation*" I got so excited, I had to make a comment or two of my own. It is not enough to pray to God because He once proved His

²³⁴ Father Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) p. 36.

awesomeness on creation week, but because He continues to prove it. The Bible, again, is not the record of what God *did* but the revelation of what God *does*. Father Donovan is spot on::

We Christians profess to believe in a continuing creation. ...The idea of a closed and finished creation, an idea based on the impossibility of God having any interest in the creation He set in inexorable motion ... is a pagan idea...²³⁵

Let me say it this way: If you need a plumber, call a plumber; but if you need a creator, talk to God!

So what exactly does a Creator God do for a living?

According to the word “create” used in the Bible, He can take a clump of clay or a dark barren landscape, or a life without meaning, and see something beautiful and meaningful that He can form it into. And then He does just that! Just the term, *create*, in the Hebrew dictionary is insightful: Creating includes: *breaking, cutting, separating, carving, smoothing, polishing, fashioning, forming, producing*,²³⁶ among others. Ouch!

If we want to clean up our act and live free from self-imposed guilt, call on the Creator, as David did in the Bible:

Create in me a pure heart, O God²³⁷

If what we want to do is follow in Jesus’ footsteps—not literally, but in terms of our lifestyle, our moral perspective, our love of God, etc.—we need to talk to the Creator:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ...

²³⁵ *ibid.* p 100.

²³⁶ see William Gesenius, *A Hebrew And English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882.

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²³⁷ Psalms 51:10.

predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son....²³⁸

After being diagnosed with prostate cancer I underwent a bone scan to see if it entered my skeletal system, but—confession time—I didn't ask God to heal me. I left that to my christian friends whose prayers for me are always greatly appreciated. When the scan came back negative, I thanked the Lord for this, but I knew that whichever way it went, I would still be grateful. He's not my plumber; so I don't always expect Him to fix my pipes.

He sometimes finds me a plumber. I am grateful for a team of medical professionals and I credit their expertise and the love they have for their craft and their patients for all the help they give.

Yes, and sometimes the Creator heals! But He is my Creator first and His primary concern is working on my soul.

It is not that we expect too much of God when we pray for healing or any one of a number of other needs we are desperate to have met. Actually, when we fail to understand His creative power in our lives, we expect too little!

Judge

When Abraham interceded for his nephew, Lot, who was living in a city God was planning on destroying, it appears as if he was bartering with God over the number of righteous for which God might spare the city. And even I saw this as Abraham bidding high and then selling lower, like any good broker might. But the key to this entire dialog is found in what Abraham said just before the

²³⁸ Romans 8:28-29.

“amen.”

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?²³⁹

God might not be a plumber, but He is a fair and merciful judge ...and He responds favorably to this compliment not as a form of flattery but as a humble request for justice. The Bible actually reads, “*The Judge of all the earth, shall he not do justice.*”²⁴⁰ Elsewhere it is correctly translated “*defend the cause*” [same words!]²⁴¹ Abraham is requesting God’s mercy. He wants God to defend the cause of his nephew who is righteous.

God's Lions

What is God’s “judgment”? The Bible story is told of a time when an Assyrian king displaced the Israelites living in central Canaan (Palestine).²⁴² They were taken captive to Assyria (modern day Iran) and many Assyrians took possession of Israel’s land as their own. God was not pleased. Then the story records something startling: “*When they first lived there, they did not worship the LORD; so he sent lions among them and they killed some of the people.*”²⁴³

Scholarship interprets this to mean that “*lions ...may have multiplied greatly during the time that the land was lying*

²³⁹ Genesis 18:25

:השפט כל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט: ²⁴⁰

²⁴¹ Deuteronomy 10:17-18 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He **defends the cause** of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. See also Psalms 9:4 For you have **upheld** my right and **my cause**, sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.

²⁴² 2 Kings 17:23-28

²⁴³ 2 Kings 17:25.

waste.”²⁴⁴ The foreign settlers interpreted this to mean that the God of the land, the God of the Israelites, according to the record, “sent lions among them, which are killing them off, because the people do not know what he requires.”²⁴⁵ The solution, according to the Assyrian king, was simple:

Then the king of Assyria gave this order: “Have one of the priests you took captive from Samaria go back to live there and teach the people what the god of the land requires.”²⁴⁶

The Assyrian king didn’t know it but the priest they brought back worshipped Jehovah, Israel’s God,²⁴⁷ the God we can talk to, the one true God—even though each town then had its own god or gods to worship.²⁴⁸

This account fascinates me because of the phrase translated “*what the god of the land requires,*” When we enter His court to hear His judgment, what argument might be raised in our defense? What does he “require”?

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? ²⁴⁹To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

A Contrite Heart

The Hebrew, to me, is saying, “*If you know what is good for you when you appear before Him: plead for mercy because you love mercy (God is not mocked) and humble yourself ready to submit to His judgment.*”

²⁴⁴ Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (Erldmann Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI. 1980) vol III. p 423.

²⁴⁵ 2 Kings 17:26.

²⁴⁶ 2 Kings 17:27.

²⁴⁷ 2 Kings 17:32 informs us that Jehovah was also worshipped thanks to the priest found to bring back the religious custom enjoyed before this time.

²⁴⁸ 2 Kings 17:29 Nevertheless, each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in the shrines the people of Samaria had made at the high places.

²⁴⁹ Micah 6:8.

*What does the god of the land require? What is the manner of God's judgment?"*²⁵⁰ What kind of a judge is He?

He is a merciful judge and easily persuaded to show mercy to the humble and penitent. God's judgment is not determined by some code of law written down, some precedent set in antiquity, much less does he react in a moment of rage. God's judgments are based on "grace." His manner is mercy²⁵¹ and He is consistently merciful toward the repentant.

...a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.²⁵²

God is not my plumber, but He is the One I go to in my need for mercy. This is reason enough to talk to Him.

Savior

If we think about it, some of what we pray for is a job for plumbers and not God. (No plumber was defamed in the writing of this chapter.) This is an analogy to point out that when we ask God to help our team win the Super bowl, we find out He is not into football.

He is not in the revenge business either—though He is obliged someday to judge the world—or giving me cause to brag (pride) or giving me scriptural support for my hormonal drives—to name a few.

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ See Exodus 26:30 Set up the tabernacle according to the plan [judgment] shown you on the mountain. God's judgment is in this verse His plan.

²⁵¹ The Spanish translation (La Biblia de las Américas (LBLA)) of John 3:16 begins: Porque **de tal manera** amó Dios al mundo. For **in such a way** God loved the world.

²⁵² Psalms 51:17.

²⁵³ I John 2:16.

If you think about it, wayward hormones, greedy eyes, and lying to ourselves just about sums it up. According to James, Jesus' brother, when my interests hinge on winning a quarrel, getting even, schadenfreude, hurt and enraged pride, wanting confirmation that what I am doing wrong isn't that bad, and the like, I am praying "*with wrong motives.*"²⁵⁴ God is not listening to me.

Well, He does hear me but He realizes He has His work cut out for Him because He knows there are many issues here that even a few secular councilors would probably admit need to be addressed.

Talking to God often reveals a deeper need in us than the one we are mentioning. Keep talking to Him. With someone else we would be digging a deeper hole for ourselves but God has a very long ladder. The benefit behind such a conversation with God is multifold. Eventually we will begin to see what God sees and that is very, very good. Also, there is healing in the process.

I have talked to God about many things out of a hurt pride while claiming to be "in the right" myself. I have wanted God to consider changing another's attitude toward me or making them more sensitive to my feelings—all of which exposed to God's care my need for a changed perspective or heart. And regarding this need, God *is* listening because He is the *Savior*. Rescuing me from myself, is God's ultimate and overarching interest in my life.

The dogma of the church recognizes salvation as the rescue from final judgment for those who accept Jesus' provision on Calvary's Cross. I trust this statement makes

²⁵⁴ James 4:3.

some sense to you. But God's interest in saving us goes deeper. It spans this life as well as the next. It is an ongoing activity for God to rescue me, and you, from a plethora of dangers that could challenge our interest in Him. It would be a mistake, as I have been attempting to show, if I didn't talk to Him and if I had no reason to believe He is there for me. If He is not there for me—and prayer makes it evident to me that He is—then He is not there at all. For persons who do not pray to God to know Him as Creator, Judge, and Savior, God remains hidden.

Physical Healing

I haven't forgotten about the major category of prayer: healing. Is God interested in physically healing me? What is in the category of physical need that God might meet? Do we chalk some physical needs up to "old age," these are not really illnesses or disease that God heals? Is it appropriate to believe that in lieu of God's healing we should get the doctor to cure us? Or does God use the medical professional as an instrument of His grace toward us?

These are reasonable questions to ask, but why ask me! Ask Him! If you want my opinion: This is a case by case matter. God might use doctors or He might override the weakness of old age if He chooses. There are Biblical examples of these.²⁵⁵

In 2005, we moved to another town requiring me to find

²⁵⁵ Deuteronomy 34:7 Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.

Colossians 4:4 Luke was a beloved physician and Jesus spoke of doctors in a complimentary way: Luke 5:31 Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

another primary care provider. I began seeing the local doctor who took note of my occasional lightheadedness. He prescribed an ultrasound examination on my carotid arteries which found a 6 cm growth in the right half of my thyroid. It was a papillary carcinoma with a follicular variant—cancerous. I have always maintained that God uses doctors.

May we pray for the sick? Is this something God recommends we bring to His attention? I would answer, “Yes.”

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ James 5:15.

The Lane

On peaceful days 'neath bluest skies or worries
led where sunlight dies

It mattered not in bliss or bane with God beside
I'd walk the lane.

I shared my heart as oft we strolled and that's a
story never told:

My joys and sadness, virtue, sin I begged His ear
time and again.

No task dare drew my heart away from this hour
at the end of day!

For, the sweetest time of all was when I'd walk the
lane with God again.

I walk this way with Him when few return this
way to walk it too.

No angered crowds to dare impeach, His
garment's hem within my reach.

And somehow like a healing balm His presence
brings a lasting calm

As I walk with Him where troubles cease and He
bestows a lasting peace.

And maybe near my heavenly home there is a
path that I might roam

I'll ask my Savior once again, for old time's sake,
let's walk the lane.

Con conversationally Speaking

Do some believers actually carry on conversations with God! Doctor Beuttler—from bible school days—spoke of enjoying the occasional company of a certain Hattie Hammond while they relived moments when God would instruct or encourage them in their individual ministries. It sounds like two dear friends talking about a third.

Does God converse with His children? Does He find ways to share, affirm, console, encourage? Is this the mark of true spiritual maturity or could this be the experience of any believer? And how many such conversations did Reverend Beuttler and Ms. Hammond have with God? Are these isolated experiences? How talkative *is* God!

If we were to poll believers by denomination, would we find more pentecostals reportedly carrying on such conversations with God? Would members of other faiths, be less likely to perceive their spiritual experiences in this way?

I have encountered in my travels some believers who appear to regularly have such conversations with God. Are they more spiritual than the rest of us? Could they possibly be misinterpreting their thoughts or somehow blending into their reality a scene from a dream or two? Are believers who fancy that God is as verbal as their many conversations with Him suggest—are these believers—hearing voices or imagining a response from God they *wish* were true? [These are honest questions.]

The short answer is that *any* believer can hear from God. In fact, this is what defines who we are. “*My sheep hear my*

voice.”²⁵⁷ Jesus reminded us. Dr. Beuttler used to say, “When you pray, ask for my God.” The implication was that He will answer you like He answers Dr. Beuttler.” The Apostle Paul concurred:

For God does not show favoritism.²⁵⁸

For me, His voice was not an audible sound but an inner voice, words and thoughts accompanied and confirmed by a deep and peaceful awareness of God.

Often I sense His peaceful presence with no words to indicate God has something to share with me. For me, God has never been chatty. It is kind-of like a spouse; there is a certain comfort knowing they are there in the house even though you, both, are pre-occupied with separate interests. You might be alone in your thoughts, but you are not really alone. There is an atmosphere of love that settles over your heart making them a part of the moment even while you busy yourself with other things. With God, it is His peace. When Jesus left His disciples the gift of His peace, He was saying more in this promise than just addressing their grief at His leaving them (by way of a roman cross):

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.²⁵⁹

Peace is the sentinel at the gate of the heart God uses to direct us. When His peace is disturbed, there is reason to question our next decision; when the garrison that guards the soul is quiet at his post, we are at peace in God’s will for us regardless of what circumstances seem to tell us.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard

²⁵⁷ John 10:27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

²⁵⁸ Romans 2:11.

²⁵⁹ John 14:27.

your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.²⁰⁰

Riding the Bus

Some of my fondest memories when I felt particularly close to God and sensing how close He was to me was when I took a bus home during my first three years at Bible school. There were long waits in bus terminals. One time my bus didn't leave until the next day and I spent the night and had little sleep in a less than no stars hotel with a sink that leaked loudly all night. I was in constant communion with the Lord during these return trips to Buffalo from Eastern Pennsylvania.

The sense of peace was strong upon me. God didn't say anything. No special thought or revelation came out of the sky or dropped into my mind or heart. There was only a keen awareness that He was beside me. It was as if angels attended my ride home.

It is important for me to remember these times and share them here because nothing could make a greater case for "the God Who walks beside" than this experience. I had no request to make, no need to mention, nothing that I wanted. In my heart, not out loud, I communed with God about things others, if they could have heard me, would have called nonsense talk. I spoke of how I enjoyed His peaceful presence. I let the Lord know I enjoyed such a simple yet real presence of God—here in the absence of any emergency.

I also prayed selectively for others. I had no list of names, no obligation to ask God anything for anyone, no promised commitment to mention anyone else's need. But

²⁶⁰ Philippians 4:7.

now and then a name was there and I just knew I wanted to mention them before God. I don't recall praying specifically or for a particular need. I simply mentioned their name to God. I raised the possibility that they might be in need and I asked the Lord to "look in on them." This way of praying for me is not unusual.

When one has known Him in this way, the other enjoyments of life are stale, hard bread compared to a nourishing, hot meal. Other amusements leave one nostalgic and bored, longing for a renewed sense of the reality of God. Sometimes I think I want to take a bus ride somewhere, but it is not the bus or the ride that matters. It is this peaceful awareness of God which I have since known in other environments: on walks, in the bath, in the privacy of my room, in a church service or prayer meeting, even in a crowd.

The Unseen Presence

How real is the idea that God can and would communicate His interests to us?

Doctor Beuttler explained that for him (and my understanding is based on the class time I spent listening to his teachings) the voice of God was not in the ear but in the heart. He seemed to be identifying an inner voice of God, a chord of peace struck in the heart, or an inner assurance of some idea which was not the product of his reasoning or previous thoughts, but which in turn was accompanied by a thought, attributable to God and scripturally supported.

This sounds like a "gut" feeling or an intuit response but these are different. God's peace accompanies His "voice"

and is in direct response to prayer—“an ear to hear” as the Revelator called it.²⁶¹ A gut feeling, is self-contained. Gut feelings like the voice of conscience are often very reliable companions to guide us on our journey through life but they are not the voice of God.

This might explain why those who are atheists are atheists. They cannot possibly confirm the existence of someone they never talk to and who never talks to them. The mantra, “the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence” is based on the absence of wanting to converse with God. To give God’s existence credibility, one must first assume His existence. I am saying that in the spirit of modern science one needs to remain open to the possibility. A real inquiry into the reality of God begins with prayer.

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.²⁶²

Is the strength of atheism the weakness of the church? Is the fact that atheists see prayer as nothing more than talking to walls and grave monuments related somehow to a christianity that has failed to be impassioned by empowering prayer? If a believer claims to enjoy a relationship with God, such a claim has no value to others unless that relationship reflects something of the nature of God through the life of the believer. And a relationship cannot exist without communication, or in the case with God, without prayer. Is it possible that there are believers whose theology is sound, they attend church regularly, and live exemplary lives but seldom get serious with God in

²⁶¹ see Revelation 2:7 following.

²⁶² Hebrews 11:6.

prayer? They would indeed be religious—and no one is doubting their salvation—but how close are they to God? How real do they make Him appear in how extended their love and commitment when circumstances prove challenging to their faith!

Atheism can only affirm that such a relationship exists in a believer by observing something in a believer's behavior that could only result from such a relationship. Like discovering an unseen planet and its gravitational influence²⁶³ on a visible sun, God is known by the influence He bears on a believer's life. (Might the church have been amiss in such matters?)

I am speaking more of a practical christianity rather than one based on a specific theology. Because we are talking about a relationship and the art of communicating in that relationship, there is a sense in which the christian walk should not be just an uncompromising commitment to doctrine, but—and primarily—a life of prayer! There need be no conflict between the two but there is, again, a difference between talking *about* God and talking *to* Him.

The Essence of True Prayer

One of the most interesting sections in the Bible story is God visiting Abraham while the forefather of the Israeli and Arab peoples was standing in the doorway of his tent. The account reads like a homespun yarn that challenges our understanding of how God should act and think.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ gravitational microlensing. <https://exoplanets.nasa.gov/interactable/11/#/4>

²⁶⁴ This account includes a banquet which the heavenly visitors seem to enjoy before going on their way. Genesis 18:8 "He then brought some curds and

How is it that the Omniscient One should wonder what to do about the wickedness in the cities of the plains in southern Palestine?

I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know²⁶⁵

And God needed to talk this over with Abraham! The personal details here provide profound insight into God's way of conversing with us despite our human limitations. I compare this to a professor emeritus kneeling beside a pre-schooler to carry on a meaningful conversation with the child on his or her level (and this word "child" will come up again shortly)—only the disparity between God and Abraham is far greater, to put it simply.

God's reason for telling Abraham was

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.²⁶⁶

This sounds like God is favoring Abraham when the Bible specifically tells us that God does not have favorites.²⁶⁷ We took this verse out of context. (A common mistake). The King James version correctly translates the next verse:

For I know him,²⁶⁸ that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD.

There is a lesson here that those who promote and live God's Word, the Bible, who exemplify a holy life, will find

milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree."

²⁶⁵ Genesis 18:21

²⁶⁶ Genesis 18:18

²⁶⁷ Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism

²⁶⁸ The NIV and NLT in verse 19 translates "For I have chosen him," and "I have singled him out" suggesting the New Testament doctrine of election. As sound as that doctrine is, this is not the context for it! Some scholars translate the Hebrew word "to know" to mean "to acknowledge" and thus to choose.

a dynamic in prayer others cannot know. They will have opportunity to know the God Who walks beside in a far more personal way.

After a discussion about stars and descendants—a story with which most believers are familiar that Abraham’s progeny would be innumerable—God turns to him and asks,

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?²⁶⁹

It is this question God put to Abraham that makes this more than Abraham’s prayer. More importantly this provides insight into God’s desire to requisition Abraham’s intercession. At the least, God was giving the patriarch opportunity to discuss the divine intention with Him. Abraham’s response would become a heart to heart talk. It was as if God was consulting His friend on a matter that grieved Him.

The Early church fathers in Egypt translated this into Greek adding the words: “*My child.*”

Shall I hid from Abraham, **my child**,²⁷⁰ [This version of the Bible continues} “the things [plural] I intend to do?”

Our insight into God’s actions here might be fogged over by a cultural conscience that makes it difficult for us to understand God’s form of justice in this story (He was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah²⁷¹). Consenting to the baffling idea that a loving God could even think to do such a thing,²⁷² what should not escape

²⁶⁹ Genesis 18:17.

²⁷⁰ ὁ δὲ κύριος εἶπεν μὴ κρύψω ἐγὼ ἀπὸ Ἀβραὰμ τοῦ παιδὸς μου ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ

²⁷¹ The modern names are Bab edh-Dhra, thought to be Sodom, and Numeira, thought to be Gomorrah. - <https://christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-a007.html>

²⁷² Evil is capable of reaching a level of purity which begs a merciful response from God, if not for the society in general—in a de-evolutionary sense in which evil is beyond reform—for subsequent generations of innocence born into it.

our attention in this story line is God's *desire to discuss this matter* with Abraham.

The use of the plural—"things" in the Greek Old Testament—implies that God was in the practice of sharing His heart and thoughts with His "children." This was not, in other words, some isolated incident.²⁷³ Not uncommon in the Bible is God revealing ahead of its time some action He must take which is emotionally as catastrophic for Him as it is literally for those He judges. As God confessed on one occasion:

My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.²⁷⁴

We call it *prophecy* or God foretelling some event. The phrase often used in the Bible in this regard is "the *burden of ...*" because that is exactly what it is to God—a heart rending thought.²⁷⁵ The point here is that God shares these personal traumas with those of His children willing to walk with Him and talk about it.

We are too often focused on God's words and not His heart²⁷⁶ behind these words, the prophecy²⁷⁷ and not the

God has reason for reserving heaven for those who pass through this purgatory and want His mercy.

²⁷³ The Hebrew uses the word *וְשֵׁנָה* meaning "that which" The word translated "about to do" is a simple present action: "doing" which might have given the Greek translation its emphasis. "The things which God is doing..."

²⁷⁴ Hosea 11:8.

²⁷⁵ Isaiah 13:1, for example: The burden against Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. NKJV. See also Psalms 38:4 "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear."

²⁷⁶ The word burden can represent also an uplifting emotion, though, in Scripture, this seems rare. See Ezekiel 24:25 "their heart's desire," i.e. The burden of the soul.

²⁷⁷ Isaiah 30:27, the NIV reads "his lips are full of wrath" which follows the LXX τὸ λόγιον τῶν χειλέων αὐτοῦ τὸ λόγιον ὀργῆς πληθρῆς But the Hebrew reads *עַיִן מְלֵאוֹת יְהוָה מְאֵשׁ* which reads literally "The burden of His lips are full of anger"

burden²⁷⁸, the theological significance of His judgment and not, as we should, the disposition, the spirit, behind it. We are more likely to discuss the judgment of God than talk to God about it. We are more likely to hone our theological opinion about judgments to come than to intercede in prayer for those who might be in its path.

But Abraham seemed to understand. In the course of their discussion Abraham asked God, rhetorically,

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Abraham was registering his support. In an uncommon exchange of roles, Abraham was encouraging God! Can we not interpret this to be saying, *“I know Lord that you must do what you must do! I know that notwithstanding you are always just and right. I support your decision (but may I ask...What if...”)* And we know Abraham bartered with God for the souls of his nephew and his family. He asked God to spare the cities for the sake of only ten righteous persons found within them. ..and God consented to his request. But alas, ten could not be found. I count three: Lot and his two girls.

Abraham interceded in prayer for Lot though he never mentioned his nephew’s name. Abraham didn’t debate God’s decision. He respected God’s unspoken wisdom in such matters. Knowing that God hears the heart, Abraham began to converse with God about those citizens in these cities that Abraham thought deserved a better fate. He interceded for them all along, no doubt, mindful that his nephew lived there.

²⁷⁸ Isaiah 13:1 in the NIV instead of “burden” reads: A “prophecy” against Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw. The word is “burden” in the Hebrew. There is here a paronomasia on the two senses burden and oracle. see Jeremiah 23:33 NIV “message”; Ezekiel 12:10. See also Gesenius Hebrew/Chaldean Lexicon on נִשְׂבָּא.

God hears what we are asking even if our words do not adequately represent our true feelings. It is even possible that we are not sure how we feel, but God is an expert in such matters and allows for our fumbling words. Abraham's prayer for Lot is a worthy study in how to talk to God. Lot and his daughters were rescued.

One scholar correctly called this "the essence of true prayer."²⁷⁹

She's Nuts!

We called for an ambulance to transport Susan to the hospital; she was having a petit mal seizure. The psychiatrist on duty had a cigar in hand [yes, we were in his office and he was smoking. This was 1970.] Leaning forward in his chair his examination began:

"Do you talk to God?" [This began to sound more like an interrogation than an examination.]

Susan, slouched in her chair, looking either exhausted or drugged. She nodded, "Yes."

"And does God talk to you?" He inquired.

She nodded again, "Yes."

"And what did God said?" [I remember his germanic accent and incorrect English.]

"Did God tell you to be good?" [I could hear nothing but sarcasm and disbelief in his tone.]

Susan didn't respond. She appeared lifeless.

The doctor turned to me with his diagnosis, "We have big words for this", he explained, "like '*psychosis*'..."

[I will ever remember that strong accent and that word

²⁷⁹ Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (Errdmann Publishing; Grand Rapids, MI. 1980) vol I. p 231.

spoken with such resolute finality.] Pausing to take a puff on his cigar, and perhaps searching for the appropriate word most descriptive for my uneducated mind, he blurted out, “She’s nuts!”

At least one branch of modern psychiatry—or one doctor—struggles to recognize a spiritual dimension to the human psyche or the simple concept of “loving God.”²⁸⁰ Her doctor apparently did not know how to deal with Susan’s conversation with God.

Clear as a Bell

There are those tragic times in a believer’s life when hearing from God is the only source of comfort or encouragement. When the church I was pastoring was taken from me by a joint decision of both church boards and the denominational officials, I was overwhelmed with the sense of loss. I could only sit among the boxes the family had packed and seek some relief through silent tears.

When I pray, I am generally not kneeling but walking. One afternoon while circling the church parking lot and talking to the Lord about all this, a peaceful feeling seem to envelope me in a warm embrace. Was this God? Two words alone came to mind. I sensed a peacefulness from God with the thought: *He heard.*

Exodus 3:7 “[and the] LORD said, ‘I ... heard.’”

²⁸⁰ Dr. Frankl of the Viennese school of Psychiatry recognized a spiritual dimension to loving someone—past or present. He wrote: “Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.” - Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning* (Kindle Locations 451-453). Kindle Edition. ”

These words are the most meaningful thing God could have said to me in my complaint about the collapse of my world. These are what He said to Moses about Israel's enslavement on the eve of their deliverance.

I believe God was saying that He was in the room when it all went down. I tearfully knew I needed to know nothing more. God didn't need to support my position or console me by justifying me or telling me how they would be punished for their arrogance. Such notions are childish nonsense and hate filled vengeance.

No other thought came to mind and heart than, "He heard!" I want to say: God said nothing more. For now, maybe just for now— and for how long?—God wanted to remain thoughtfully silent in all this? For now this was sufficient. I was at peace: *He heard!!!*

When God Comes Calling

It is scriptural to say that from time to time God shares His burdens with His children. God telling Abraham about Sodom would lack reason unless it was giving Abraham opportunity to intercede for Lot, his nephew, which he did. Hidden in the private lives of countless believers is the witness to this truth that when God seemed grieving over some tragic consequence about to befall someone He loved, God would lay the burden on another believer's heart to pray. God could act unilaterally; after all, He is God, but He chooses according to the Biblical record to involve us in prayer.²⁸¹ As the Psalmist affirmed,

²⁸¹ Amos 3:7 Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan (secret, counsel) to his servants the prophets. The word "secret," יָסוּד carries the notation of "familiar converse with God, intimacy" - Brown Francis. Brown,, p.691.

The LORD confides in those who fear him²⁸²

It seemed strange to me while a first year student in bible school to be wanting to pray about the financial shortfall of a fellow student, who was also a girl, Gloria, who was about to leave campus for lack of funds. I confided in the school nurse, Joyce, (I liked her!) who would keep me informed. I didn't want to pray for Gloria because I did not want to romance her ..and I wrongfully thought there should be a connection between these two ideas. But the burden was too evident and I would express my deep concern to God—this time on my knees. (I designated one of the storage closets on campus as my prayer chamber.) A week later, Joyce asked me where I got the money to pay half of Gloria's year's tuition (and room and board). I hadn't but I went back into the closet and told God that He was half way there. A week later her financial responsibility for the year was met in full and Gloria stayed in school to graduate and later marry Glenn and become a missionary to South America.

I was chosen camp pastor one summer—a privilege I soon discovered not to be sought after: teenagers should not be equipped with containers of shaving cream, water balloons and other such paraphernalia used for mischief. But laying this aside, at five AM one morning I was awakened, burdened for one of those teenagers. I knew nothing about her. I do not recall her name, but I recall walking back and forth in the kitchen area with silent tears blurring my vision and asking the Lord (not that He would say), "*What's wrong!?*" I knew somehow it was God, not me, who was burdened for this camper. So I began to pray, "*Lord, she is yours (the sheep of your pasture). Do what*

²⁸² Psalms 25:14.

you want for her!" I prayed this simple prayer over and over and over again during the next hour or so while I walked and cried.

Later that day I sought some feedback from the counselor over this student to discover that just 2 weeks earlier her mother had died and this young person had not wept or expressed her grief to anyone. She repressed her feelings in an emotionless and expressionless glare. God was concerned. That night, the flood waters broke as she wept over her mother's passing. These were healing waters and I came to understand how ready God is to respond to our pain by involving others in intercessory prayer for us.

When God Speaks

A large number of christians share a testimony that with varying frequency—for some, on rare occasion during times of crisis—Jesus or God speaks to them. Rarely does one of them hear an audible voice like the Apostle Paul did²⁸³ while he was as yet not a believer in the christian faith or young Samuel²⁸⁴ who was the last of the older prophets who still carried God's message of reconciliation through repentance for Israel.

Some believers identify an understanding of a scriptural promise as coming from God and, therefore, as God speaking to them. Whether we maintain that He "has spoken" through the Scriptures or that He still "speaks"

²⁸³ Acts 9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

²⁸⁴ 1 Samuel 3:10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

through them, is it not the same? Meditating on some Bible passage would here be the same as meditating on the “Word” of God and, therefore, meditation may become the means for God to speak²⁸⁵ to us.

As I have been sharing through this book, believers may identify a peace or peacefulness in their spirit, a calm, that we could associate with some instruction or promise of God either read in the Word of God or evident in our circumstances. Reverend Beuttler maintained that these three bear witness to God’s directive or guidance when they “line up:” an open door of opportunity, the Scripture, and that peace within. It is this “peace” I have been identifying with God speaking to me.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.²⁸⁶

Visited

Communion with God is not always about us. It is sometimes God Who comes calling on us either with instructions for ministry or to share some burden with us so that we can make it a matter of intercessory prayer. David communing with the Lord gratefully acknowledged, *“You have visited me in the night;”*²⁸⁷

A visit from God is a humbling experience. David asked the Lord, *“What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?”*²⁸⁸

Isaiah confessed (and many believe this also applies to

²⁸⁵ Revelation 2:11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

²⁸⁶ Philippians 4:7.

²⁸⁷ Psalms 17:3 NKJV.

²⁸⁸ Psalms 8:4 NKJV.

Jesus) that God frequently awakened the prophet to instruct him for the day.

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, **wakens my ear to listen** like one being **instructed**.²⁸⁹

God called on the prophet Samuel while still a lad. Samuel was not yet familiar with the voice of God. There was a learning experiencing involved. Samuel served the high priest, Eli, whom God used to instruct the young man.

Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.

So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.²⁹⁰

Perhaps Samuel's story exemplifies many who do not initially recognize God as He tries to get their attention. Over time a life of prayer will change this. I enjoyed the peace of God long before I connected it with God and came to understand how God might confirm His Word to me through that peaceful presence. God walks beside us now but how many Christians ignore the divine presence not out of disrespect but from busyness and ignorance.

"The absence of evidence," one of the favorite phrases of non-believers, is a consequence of "the absence of a prayer life."

The Scripture, the Bible, is replete with examples of God calling on one of His humble servants to involve them in

²⁸⁹ Isaiah 50:4.

²⁹⁰ I Samuel 3:6-9.

His plans. There are also examples of God's people being called on by God because He was burdened about something and wanted to talk it over with a friend. Abraham's prayer for Lot comes to mind.

Perhaps my book is unbalanced giving more space to our need for God and not enough space to underscore God's desire for us. His desire toward us is real and is more what prayer should be all about than our list of requests.

If you think about it, God wants to share Himself with us. He wants us to know Him. The Lord confessed His interest in us to the prophet Jeremiah, promising,

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.²⁹¹

Communion with God, prayer, is our opportunity to know Him but this is an ongoing fellowship with Him, a prayer life, not just a minute or two of requests. Our requests are important to Him, but His request for some of our time and fellowship is more so.

Listening

But I have not always been listening. I live with the memory of missed opportunities for God, of those times I was in His way or He wanted me to do or say something I argued down. This is not to suggest God didn't have a plan 'B' but it does mean that I added one more lingering regret to plague my memories.

It was at the end of a church meeting mostly of teenagers enjoying the inspiring challenge of a gifted speaker. The air seemed charged with a sense of urgency to give serious

²⁹¹ Jeremiah 24:7.

thought to the speaker's words. There are such times when someone can move the masses, ignite the fire of passion to act in some way. It was a decisive moment for many of those youth in attendance, as it turned out, also for the young lady who came with me.

In general terms, we were being urged to consider giving our lives to God. We were being charged with a sense of commitment to something excitingly new and life changing. I was sitting on the end of a row with my friend sitting next to me when we were asked to stand and come forward as a sign of our decision to take the message seriously.

I had been here before listening to what I might call a spiritually motivational speaker. I had in a previous year made my way to the front of the auditorium to commit my life to God and saw no reason to do this again.

But then, God spoke to my heart to go forward. I cannot make this any clearer. I seemed possessed of an almost overpowering desire to go forward. It was as if some emotion was physically pulling on my shirt sleeve trying to move me out of the row, but I resisted for logic's sake. I didn't need to go up to the front; so, I didn't.

I never thought about my friend who later asked me why I didn't go forward. She then told me that she wanted to go up but I stood in her way. Although it was unusual for her, to be so compliant, she didn't push me out of the way. She wanted me to go with her. I stood in her way.

I stood in God's way.

Many years later while visiting a church member in one of the local hospitals, I felt the same urging to visit another patient whom I never met before. They were the hospital roommate to the person I came to see and pray for. Again,

it was as if God was asking something of me. But again, I failed to follow up. This time the conviction born of the memory of that youth service was unshakeable. When I got home, I returned to the hospital to visit this stranger only to discover they had been moved into the city, miles farther away. The ride into the city was itself forty-five minutes one way not to mention the traffic and the parking. My feelings were mixed. I felt stupid but also convinced this was God. When I found their room, I stood at the foot of the bed, introduced myself and told them I sensed that God wanted me to pray for them. On leaving the room I felt like I had faithfully discharged a duty to God. The ride home was far more enjoyable.

Ella

There were other persons I knew personally either in Bible college or church who affirmed to me that indeed God does from time to time speak to us. Their testimony has had a positive influence on my faith. These are a few accounts that you probably will not read about elsewhere but which, I trust, add clarity and emphasis to what I am trying to say here.

Pastor Snook's wife, Ella, is one such example. It is possible for God to speak through scripture, too. Pastor Snook wrote his story in *"God's Plan & Purpose for your Life,"* the story of his and Ella's call into pastoring. On the closing pages of his book, we read that Ella, while they were pastoring in Vermont, came down with Bright's disease but it wasn't diagnosed until the condition was so far advanced doctor's thought there was little they could do for her. While she was hospitalized in Vermont, Pastor

Snook prayed in an uncommon way:

Thy will be done and forgive us if we have been negligent. I need her desperately... Is it within the limits of Your Sovereignty to let me know what the outcome will be so that I can prepare myself?²⁹²

We normally think of prayer in terms of a request, but here our pastor knew that God did not need to be vindicated as a merciful Lord. Pastor Snook choose to be more respectful and less demanding with His words. He only knew how much he needed his wife at his side. Doctor Beuttler noted once that *“Many times affirmation of God’s promise gives better results than mere petition.”*²⁹³

Ella was dying. After the family discussed moving her to a diagnostic center in Boston, Pastor Snook went again before the Lord in prayer asking for wisdom when God shared Psalms 46 verse 5 with him in the translation of the time [King James Version].

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

Two days later Ella was well enough to be discharged from the hospital—in Vermont. She was not moved.

I was privileged to visit her in Vineland, New Jersey shortly before her death. She was then in her eighties.

Behold, a New Thing

In my book *“I Remember”* I relate the following testimony which is as candidly accurate as I can describe it. I have

²⁹² Harry M Snook. *God’s Plan and Purpose For Your Life*. (Self-published: Vineland, N.J.: 1989) p 149.

²⁹³ Spoken in a message given at Oakleigh Christian Retreat Center in Charlottesville, VA. on Sunday morning October 31, 1971. taken from a Youtube audio file by Jay Hearn, Published on Nov 2, 2017 entitled *“The Manifest Presence of God”* Part 4 (Revealed thru the Senses)“

always maintained that God was speaking²⁹⁴ to me in this experience.

It happened during the song service. I cannot remember the song we were singing at the time, but I do remember a strange, what I would call, “anxiety” rolled over me, starting at my head and working its way down my body toward my feet. I can remember—I kid not—getting a terrible case of the shakes, not because I felt cold. I simply began to shake uncontrollably. It had never happened before and hasn’t happened since. Make a note of this if it seems important.

I became distracted. I knew where I was, but my focus on worship was gone. This was a unique experience. Almost completely overcome by a panicky feeling, I grabbed the song book as a distraction hoping that if I just begin to read hymns, read anything at hand, it might politely pass. I opened the hymn book to song 154 and began to read the chorus:

I will make the darkness light before you, What is wrong I’ll make it right before you, All the battles I will fight before you, And the high place I’ll bring down.

As I read it, the nervousness began to leave my body. A peaceful calm began to work its way up my body until I was completely at ease. I was calm, completely relaxed and thinking it had passed for good. Not caring to analyze the experience but simply to forget that it ever happened, I looked over at my young wife (This was during our first year of marriage) to see what song we were on and began to thumb my way to that place in the hymn book.

The shakes returned a second time, starting at my head and working their way to my legs. You would think that at

²⁹⁴ *I Remember: The Untold Story of My Youth: A Study in Introspection.* p 232-233

this moment, I would have frantically fingered through the hymnal for song 154, but I didn't. I didn't have to. I simply closed and reopened the hymnal. It opened at, yes, song 154. I began again to read the words of the song and its chorus, while the anxiety again began to dissipate from toe to head as before.

Now, what do you make of that?

Once again, I found my place in the current song and began to sing, when the shakes returned for a third time.

You think I am making this up? I wish I were but I'm not. I can't explain it any better.

This time when the 'nervousness' attacked again, I choose to grab the Bible instead of the song book. I opened it at random as I had with the hymnal. My interest was in finding a distraction, something to get my mind off this craziness and something that could calm me. The Bible held special meaning to me, so it was a likely candidate for the task. I opened at random to Isaiah 43 and began to read. Some parts stood out.

But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, ...
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
Since you are precious and honored in my sight,

John King

and because I love you,
Do not be afraid, for I am with you;...
Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

The anxiety, the shakes, the nervousness was gone—again like a wave of peace starting at one end of me to the other. I stood there in some disbelief because I wasn't so sure the nervousness wouldn't return. I kept the Bible open to the text before me and read it again and again, building a confidence that I was free from this strange experience.

I was free. The shakes were gone for good. I returned to the song service and joined in with the congregation as if nothing had happened. It was over, but what did it mean? How was I to interpret this?

This scripture subsequently has had great significance to me over the years and I still meditate on it.

Behold I do a new thing.

Face to Face

In May 1979 I was privileged to conduct a four day seminar at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and although I could commute from home, the Lord told me to stay on campus for the four days while I was teaching. I obeyed and this week became a spiritual highlight of my life as a minister. Did God speak to me ...really?

I am persuaded of it! From time to time, God communicates to us while we are in prayer. Prayer can be our face to face with God. While praying we may

encounter our Lord in personal and healing ways.

Is not prayer God's opportunity to offer us—in human terms—an empathetic touch, a sensitive and caring glance, a kind voice designed to comfort the emotionally weary²⁹⁵ or to provide guidance to us when the path ahead is not clear.²⁹⁶

I am saying that “*real healing*” occurs through prayer. It is in prayer that we meet with God. It is in prayer that in a way perhaps indescribable God touches us.

Is it not reasonable to believe that the ministry the Savior had during His sojourn here toward Israel, He might still have now toward you and me?

The Spirit of the ... LORD is on me, because the LORD has ... sent me to bind up the brokenhearted....²⁹⁷ The ... LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.²⁹⁸

To assume God is not here for us in our need, that God does not respond to prayer, that He is not capable of communicating His love or sharing wisdom with us, is to make our Christian faith merely a ritual, the Bible a largely uninteresting literary work, and the healing touch we crave from Him a false promise. Christians would have no more comfort or wisdom to offer than what is available by secular studies. And as welcome as secular studies are we would be living a lie without the benefit of prayer. The Bible would cease to carry the authority we profess it must have.

²⁹⁵ Matthew 26:41 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak

²⁹⁶ Acts 16:6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia

²⁹⁷ Isaiah 61:1.

²⁹⁸ Isaiah 50:4.

He sent out his word and healed them...²⁹⁹

Hubbard

In all that I have written in nine books I failed to mention what to me is undeniable confirmation of “the God Who walks beside.” This is a detail of my life easily lost in the fog of bad memories, of confused arguments, and the war of words. Somehow painful times unless forgiven are more memorable. Yesteryear’s hurts yell loudest. They gather attention over the soft whisper of God’s oft promised blessing or the gentle touch of His hand on our shoulder as He passes by. These are moments of profound importance and eternal significance when God says anything to the soul or touches our life. But these are testimonies seldom told because they are too often unnoticed. Angels unobserved,³⁰⁰ promises overlooked,³⁰¹ and God’s healing³⁰² touch unrecognized for what they are: God’s loving involvement in the moments of our lives when He deems the time³⁰³ is right.

I was enjoying a hot bath—as is my custom—and in the silence of that alone time, warm water like a heated blanket warmed not just my cold form but my soul. Often I have spent these times trying to make sense out of all the senselessness in my life, but this one time a soft memory like a small boy’s toy boat drifted beside and seem to bump into my recollections. It is very much worth

²⁹⁹ Psalms 107:20.

³⁰⁰ Hebrews 13:2.

³⁰¹ Hebrews 4:1.

³⁰² Hosea 11:3.

³⁰³ Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

relating.

I was teaching at a small bible school in Western Pennsylvania and in preparation for class, I was studying in the Bible. But I was sidetracked by an idea that inspired me. I began to prepare a sermon I had no intentions of preaching because I had no speaking engagement scheduled—nor would I since this ministry was a new appointment for me and the local churches did not know about me. Consequently, this “message” would have no vent, no outlet to be heard. I would have to suppress a distinct desire to present it and this desire was, not unexpectedly, growing stronger as I meditated on the thought.

What it was is not important to this story. What is important is that it—to use a biblical phrase—burned within me.³⁰⁴ I was distracted. I began to think of nothing else as important. My class notes cease to inspire—at least until I could discharge this pent up longing to share this message. I told no one.

Then one of the faculty at the school, who was well known and had speaking engagements on a regular basis, approached me with his dilemma. He had a conflict in his schedule and wondered if I could take the Wednesday evening Bible study at a local church in nearby Ohio. I knew it was God. I said, “Sure.”

The delivering of that study that evening was like a pressure release on my soul. It was like a hunger finally satisfied. It was as if all of life was summed up in this peak moment, this peak experience, and God brought me to it. There was a small group of believers there who found the

³⁰⁴ Luke 24:32 They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

message equally inspiring. When I was done, nobody moved, nobody wanted to leave. It was as if they needed a moment longer in prayer and then time to refocus their attention elsewhere.

I had the distinct impression that this is something God wanted said and He used me to say it! A few years later, in another ministry, while I was pastoring, I received a visit from a colleague who asked for my notes on that message. He apparently was in attendance that night in Hubbard, Ohio and, for reasons still unknown to me, he wanted that study. I could not produce it. Whatever I had written down for that evening, the pages were lost. Most of that night, anyway, was a spontaneous bubbling over of an excitement that needed to be put into words. And now, thinking back, my experience joins the testimonies of others that speak to the reality of God's involvement in our lives.

Crisis Managing

Our pastor, Pastor Snook, tells the story when he and a colleague were driving down an isolated country road and ran out of gas.³⁰⁵ They would have to walk some distance to get gas but pastor choose first to pray and tell God. His traveling companion was incredulous never assuming such a prayer had any traction. But a few yards down the road and around the bend they came upon a can—you guessed it—filled with gasoline, enough to get them to the next gas station. I found this story perfectly believable.

I don't believe that God magically had the can of gas appear by the roadside. I don't believe He "poof" created it out of nothing. That is precisely the kind of explanation pagan religion would offer. Father Donovan, missionary to the Masai people of East Africa, agreeably noted that the miracle is in us not in our circumstance. Accordingly, God does not need to suspend natural law to answer prayer. God needs to get us to do the praying, that's all; so, that we will connect the dots and know it was He who provided. Father Donovan wrote:

"In prayer it is not really so much what happens to God that is important, as what happens to us. The crucial question in prayer is not whether God suspends the laws of the universe, or whether He grants what people ask for, but whether we really open ourselves to Him, open ourselves to His creating, saving presence."³⁰⁶

An awareness of God in the circumstance through prayer will suspend our personal universe of ideas—ideas that otherwise fail to include Him. It is this knowledge of

³⁰⁵ Harry M Snook. *God's Plan and Purpose For Your Life*. (Self-published: Vineland, N.J.: 1989) p 39.

³⁰⁶ Father Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) p. 102.

His intrusion and intervention that is a catalyst to His creative work on the soul.

This was a coincidence for certain, but one, I can see God orchestrating. God, then, encourages Pastor Snook to pray before taking his stroll toward the next town.

Doctor Walter Beuttler spoke often of the presence of God and His providential involvement in our lives which did not always require the unexplainable. Beuttler taught that “..the ‘*distinguishing mark*’ between the Lord’s people and other nations was to be the ‘*presence of God.*’”³⁰⁷

And what if Pastor Snook had not prayed? The can of gas would still be there. Orchestrated coincidence is sometimes God’s way of overseeing our needs, and prayer is His opportunity to let us know He knew and provided.

Prayer Therapy

In 1971 when we were living in southern New Jersey, I was thinking of returning to college by attending, then, Glassboro State College (now, Rowan University). A former pastor, Reverend Garrahan, was an associate professor of psychology at the school. He recommended I go Methodist (as was he) once I got a degree. I applied to the college.

But over the course of a few months I forgot all about the school. I was despondent pastoring our first church. All of this was so new and strange to me; so, when I received a phone call to join up with a little Bible school in western Pennsylvania, I packed up the family and went. Weeks later my forwarded mail included an acceptance letter

³⁰⁷ Walter Beuttler, Wade Taylor, ed., *The Manifest Presence of God: My Spiritual Journey*,” (Deeper Life Press) 2nd edition. 2015. p. 21.

from Glassboro State, but it was too late. I wondered if I made a major blunder in choosing my future. I needed to talk to God. This led me to revisit a few more life decisions which now I began questioning.

Such questions prompted a lifetime of conversation with God. There were no quick answers and I never expected God to lay out His twenty year plan for me. It was somehow reassuring just to share with Him the possibilities as I saw them. I hoped that during the journey as I came upon a fork in the road He would find a way to direct me.

Now, in the twilight years of life, there are far fewer questions and a greater acceptance of life for what it turned out to be. I may have in part rationalized my choices trying to see the good in them, but there is an element of truth in saying that there were signs along the way that God hadn't given up on me.

I have often asked myself whether I was living God's plan 'B' for my life, but this might be an unfair question. Isn't God's will—well—God's will? And perhaps God knew all along where the road led. Talking to Him about all of this was important for my spiritual growth, my adjustment to change, and ultimately my acceptance of life.

My perspective has changed, which was another benefit of years of conversing with God. I was, for one, misinformed about the definition of a successful life. The 24 plus years we pastored and in which I taught the Bible were *not* wasted. My journey was as ordinary and as unique as anyone else's. Perhaps, my amount of responsibility was less than another's—or perhaps, more—but there is a biblical explanation for that: the parable of God distributing different responsibilities to His servants.

As Jesus described it:

It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.³⁰⁸

And what about the hard times—was God in them? I used to wonder if I had missed God’s best and my tears were proof of it, but not one Bible personality who was called into God’s service led a life of ease and comfort. Sometimes bad things happen to saints. I came to reevaluate even the bad times in light of this truth.

Through prayer I was able to see the upper side of this tapestry. Prayer brings to light the otherwise hidden grace of God that has often resolved the unresolvable or built bridges across the uncrossable, the chasms of unthinkable tragedies, so that we might continue to walk on in Him.

Patricia

Patricia was my girlfriend in my second year at Bible school. In our second semester she was beginning to show disinterest in being with me. She was young, right out of high school, probably 17 or 18 years of age. And now she preferred being with her friends. (Small groups of girls were not uncommon on campus.) I recall arguing with her outside the gym while her friends were playing basketball. I was jealous. I wanted to walk the lane with her or just to be with her; she wanted time away. (That summer we would break up.)

I went to prayer. I was in my closet (the storage room I used to get away and pray in) and I complained to God about her. I remember telling the Lord that He would have to change her. (“Change her” I said, “Change her!”

³⁰⁸ Matthew 25:14.

And that's a quote.) I was at peace and—as many christians describe it—I felt the presence of God. Then these words seem to drop out of the ceiling and into that peaceful moment, “I need to change you.” (That is also a quote.) I heard no voices; it was a feeling, a sensing, again, “*as clear as a bell and as sharp as a razor.*” Doctor Beuttler used the additional phrase: *a spiritual sound*. I took this to be from the Lord and I was upset—at God. For the next few minutes I had nothing to say. I just knelt there in total silence. It was a little while before I agreed with Him and started to thank Him for His involvement in my life and His interest in what happens to me.

Rush ahead to the fall semester of my Junior year. (That previous summer I asked Pat to marry me and she declined.) I stood near the window of my dorm room as students drove up to the Admin building to register. I held my breath each time a car drove up; it wasn't Pat. I wanted to see her but I didn't want to see her. The next part of my story I shared in my book, *I Remember*:

“I was ushering a Friday evening missionary service on campus. I was standing at the back of the auditorium when I felt a warmth around my shoulders and a still peaceful sense of God's Presence—many know what I am talking about. I thanked Him for the “thought.”

A moment later Patricia walked right in front of me into the service on a visit.³⁰⁹”

God cares. That evening I sought her out once again to ask her to reconsider my marriage proposal. But “No” means no. I survived the only headache I sustained in four years of school. As isolated this experience was in my life,

³⁰⁹ I wrote about this incident in “I Remember.”

it is a constant reminder to me that God is indeed interested and involved.

Francis

Tween boys are feeling early impulses of manhood. That's probably why they pick fights for no reason with their best friend. Francis, who was a great guy, fell in line and began shoving me backward hoping I would respond with an equal and opposite force. But I wasn't immediately interested in "mixing it up;" so, I backed off multiple times while he kept coming. We were pugnacious little dimwits and it was probably hormonal. As Francis advanced I was warming up to the idea (and getting hotter), except, if I did throw a punch, it would be like Ralphie, in "The Christmas Story" punching Scut Farkus." My testosterone level was rising (if that's possible. We were pre-pubescent). I was ready now for war. I was enraged.

But I went aside a moment and told God. I gave God a chance to do something about it before I would!

Now I guess it is very possible that his mom, my aunt, or my mom saw this going down and stepped in to stop it. One of them may have told Francis to "knock it off or else." All I know is that when I left the bed room after talking to God, Francis never again displayed such belligerence. We soon outgrew it but should I credit God with answered prayer? I always have.

Grandma and Me

[I write primarily to grandchildren; my beloved wife of 50 years is their grandma.]

Every marriage encounters speed bumps and sometimes

with disastrous results. Grandma and I were no exception to the rule. Our marriage was not immune to the harmful effects of hard times. Church work brought a level of stress that was fracturing our relationship, and no matter what we tried or how much we communicated our woes to each other, no amount of talk seemed sufficient to heal.

Grandma and I used to walk a lot and talk. Behind the church in one small town in which we pastored were these old railroad tracks. They were still in use but because of their condition any train coming would be moving so slowly that we would have considerable time to react. These tracks hold special meaning to me, and I hope to grandma, because we were walking and talking away from the public and away from annoying traffic. Still, I was seemingly making matters worse.

I recall one afternoon while still at home in anger I walked away to avoid saying something I would regret. I descended the staircase, kicking out one of the banister rails on my way down. I walked into the kitchen and took an entire loaf of bread and jammed it violently into the waste bucket. I was furious—over what? Memory doesn't serve.

I knew things were seemingly hopeless; so, I prayed. But not a quiet, respectful, eloquent prayer filled with praise and hope. No, I told God that if He didn't do something, I was done! It was His call and I wasn't going to hold Him to anything but I did want Him to do something, if He would. I was planning on the morrow to ride out—out of town and out of state ...and just maybe out of everyone's life. (We had two of three sons and they were young.) I was running.

Now the details of this emotional explosion are—and I

say this lovingly—none of your concern, none of your business. I can't remember them now anyway. But I was leaving to see a former pastor/colleague and try to get some advice. I wasn't sure I would be back. My thoughts and feelings were that crazy wild.

Didn't grandma and I love each other? I couldn't tell at the time. I was lost in a miasma of despair, a morass of misunderstanding, unaddressed stress and anxiety. I was frustrated over selfish interests. But as I look back now, I don't think I ever stopped loving grandma. But I didn't see love as sufficient to glue Humpty Dumpty back together again. So I was leaving ...tomorrow, Thursday morning. I couldn't leave then; it was Wednesday night and I had a Bible study to officiate. Ambivalent and confused I was trying to plan some things, even if none of this made any sense—and it didn't!

It was late afternoon while at the church that I dropped my notes on the floor and couldn't pick them back up. My chest hurt but my mom always told me that if I could raise my hands over my head, I wasn't having a heart attack. And I could lift them; so, I tried again to retrieve the scattered pages. I couldn't.

I returned home to tell grandma and she immediately drove me to the hospital where I spent the next six days in Coronary Intensive Care and post coronary. I remember watching my systolic blood pressure on the heart monitor jump 10 points or more when grandma appeared in the doorway to my room. (I looked forward to her visits.) She made the trip to see me—even though it was winter and she had to make her way on hilly, snow covered roads. Truth be told: I missed her when she wasn't there. When I left the hospital with a bill of health, I was more in love

with grandma than ever and I knew it. The storm was over and the sun was out. It was warm and inviting. Everything seemed to miraculously change for the better.

Oh, they never did find the cause why my blood pressure had dipped dangerously low (and at one point the nurse could not find a pulse). While in the hospital I was able to study for the Conference at which I would be teaching the following Spring. It was my time to come apart awhile and rest. Who would have guessed that God would provide me such an opportunity in such a way. I believe wholeheartedly that He did and my prayer—as raw and rough as it was—should not go unnoticed.

Another Oh. We had no medical insurance but the bill, both hospital and doctor, was paid in full by other, outside, sources.

Miriam's Coup

This testimony does not follow the theology which would not make room for the providence of God to orchestrate or allow a hospital stay to repair a Humpty Dumpty marriage. God would never abuse faith to be the agent of an CICU (coronary intensive care unit) visit. Or would He!? Faith gets us out of the hospital, not into it! Or could there be the occasional exception? Is not calamity and illness also at God's disposal when He is working on a solution?

When Moses' sister Miriam along with her brother Aaron attempted a coup d'état against Moses because they didn't like his wife³¹⁰ (he married outside the Jewish culture.), God was understandably furious.

³¹⁰ Numbers 12:1-14.

Miriam's argument had nothing to do with Mrs. Moses. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" Miriam and Aaron asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?"

I love this next sentence, "And the LORD heard this."³¹¹

The divine solution was to give Miriam two weeks of leprosy. (God's judgment against Aaron is unknown. He was already in leadership.) God reasoned: had her father just spit in her face (a sign of disgrace) she would have known better. God's solution to this insurrection was the 14 day virus.

Please note: Moses was praying for his sister's well-being. (His prayer has actually been set to music in Hebrew.)

So Moses cried out to the LORD, "Please, God, heal her!"³¹²

I came to think that although God did not intend for me to suffer any heart complications (naturally speaking), I had heart complications (spiritually speaking) and some more drastic measures—from our perspective—were allowable.

Spiritual Training

I cannot say God will always answer prayer a certain way or that He will give us what we want, but I can affirm that He's listening and He cares. I have seen my prayer life as an ongoing friendship with God and such a friendship that humbles me to think that God would desire this relationship with me. Over the years, I have shared my day with God. I have told Him about even my little foolish interests that in a mature believer's world might appear

³¹¹ Numbers 12:2.

³¹² Numbers 12:13. הָלַךְ אֶתְּ מִרְיָם אֶתְּ אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם

ridiculously selfish and trivial. But I just know He has been listening.

I do not recall asking for healing for myself; but I remember asking the Lord to visit others (I named names often) to make their life easier or to provide them some relieve from pain or suffering. I have cried many tears for people I didn't even know asking God to intrude as a merciful God into their circumstance.

I have enjoyed hours studying the Bible. During my later teen years, I practiced teaching out loud in the solitude of my bedroom. I converted many pillows and my sister's stuff animals to the faith. Perhaps a few angels unseen were in attendance. I painted one wall black to use as a blackboard to help me teach me. I was learning about God: His personal approach to situations, His uncommon solutions in scripture, the loving way He could stoop to our intellectual level to explain things sufficient to earn His trust.

I had learned to identify a sense of the peace of God distinct and different from all other feelings, though I cannot explain it. It is like eating a new fruit or a new species of game meat or some unusual vegetable and trying to tell someone else how it tastes. David once invited us to "*Taste and see that the LORD is good.*"³¹³ I have discovered that there is something to this. It is more than a poetic way of talking and it has nothing to do with asking others to join a church or a religion. The word "taste" in the original Bible is onomatopoeic, ta'am. The 'm' reminds me of our word 'yum'. Talking to the Lord has proven for me to be very satisfying and psychologically

³¹³ Psalms 34:8.

rewarding. But talking to God is also all about ‘seeing,’ becoming aware of God’s presence, where meeting with Him makes ‘sense’ [pun intended] to the soul. Taste and sight represent spiritual senses which was David’s way of alerting us to a spiritual world outside our normal sensory perception. And David added that it is all ‘good.’

Thickets

Faith also is learned. We should learn to meet the smaller challenges of life while young so that later in life the much larger ones do not turn us into quitters. It is wise to make God a part of the day while young—as the prophet poetically put this:

If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out,
how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country,
how will you manage in the thickets?³¹⁴

We never know when in some tragic moment a life of prayer will come in handy to lift our spirit and affirm once again that even in “this” you can keep faith strong.

The C Word

Now that I am old and in my seventies and facing radiation treatment for an aggressive cancer, it is important to know that the years I spent in converse with God were not wasted hours. In painful situations I have asked Him to hang with me because, like Moses,³¹⁵ just knowing He is there is what gives me peace.

It is in the storm that we learn to trust God. It is in the

³¹⁴ Jeremiah 12:5.

³¹⁵ Exodus 32:15 Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.”

storm we find God real, when our focus is more on Him and less on our own pleasures. It is in the silence of our pain that we hear Him whisper peace to us.

This trip with cancer is different in some respects from the experience in 2008 with thyroid cancer. Off the top, I am considered too old for the surgeon's knife to cut it out; so, radiation is the recommended treatment. And whereas before life went on with a simple daily pill, now, I need shots that my doctor cautioned has unwelcome side effects. The side effects, as life changing as they could be, are nonetheless, a welcome trade off for something that could metastasize and get into my bones if left unaddressed. On the good side, a CAT scan on my brain was normal and a bone scan before that saw nothing alarming. The cancer is still contained.

I am relaxed, as long as God's peace is in attendance. I even tell people that I am enjoying the attention since the persons in my life are being so thoughtful. I assume it is a result of this diagnosis, though, they all would deny this. And I smile because love is love regardless of the rational behind the giving of it.

Treatment

My treatment began with a consultation with the oncologist. He was talking about fiduciary injections, hormone therapy, a CT simulation, and radiation treatments.. And this was not a conversation about someone in the church. We were talking about *me*.

The local medical network allows patients to log unto the web to view their treatment schedule, medication regiment and other pertinent information. I logged in and

recall my feelings on seeing the words “aggressive” and “cancer” written on the web page.

As of this moment none of this appears so serious that I will not be able to finish this book, but I did want to record my reactions to this news.

All this takes a few months of scheduling multiple doctor’s visits, lots of shots and pills, not to speak of the follow up work to monitor my progress. I have friends who were anxious about the “wait” between visits but my oncologist told me that in one foreign country, the delay is nine months, half a year longer!

Peace

Cancer and I are old friends. I had thyroid cancer. The surgeon tried to save one thyroid lobe and probably the isthmus but a second operation was needed two weeks later to remove it all. This was ten years ago and now it is somewhere else in the body which needs the doctor’s “magical” touch.

I remember when I got the call from the doctor’s office after a biopsy for thyroid cancer. The news caused a chilling fear to ripple down my body. I asked God to please remove the fear and replace it with His peace. And He did. It was this peace I needed with the return of cancer and God has proven consistently faithful in this regard.

I am at peace.

Final Thoughts

I have been privileged to know a few persons for whom God was in every way a member of their inner circle of friends. They spoke of God in the same human terms we use to describe any wholesome and growing relationship. They were not super people. They lived with the same temptations and human weaknesses you and I live with. They were equally susceptible to disease and sickness.

These persons were not miracle workers. Other people could not depend on their closeness to God to persuade God to do anything purely on the strength of that friendship. God was the all powerful One and their closeness to Him could not be abused in the selfish interest of others.

They lived, it seemed apparent, in an atmosphere of worship. They were in constant contact with God. Their decisions were governed by that inner peace of God we spoke of. But there was nothing scary about them in this regard. One might assume that their faces might have glowed like Moses' face did when He returned from meeting with God. Yet, in every way they appeared very much like you and I. And even if they could be put in the category of an Elijah, that miracle working Old Testament prophet, Jesus' brother James reminded us:

Elijah was a human, being, even as we are. [But the difference was] He prayed earnestly³¹⁶.

Difference

This is not to say that there was no other distinction. There

³¹⁶ James 5:17.

was an unidentifiable yet undeniable difference with them in their attitude on life, the way they spoke of God, and the endurance of their faith and love even through tragedies.

And they had an understanding of scripture that brought the Bible to life. It was as if when relating the stories in its pages, they were relating their own story. They could talk about the experiences of the ancients as if they had personally been there to witness it all.

They were not theologians in the academic sense but they clearly knew things about God that we failed to learn even with years of education. No doubt their knowledge was born out of years of walking with God, following His guidance in the matters of life, and cherishing His counsel.

I personally sat under the ministry of some of them and along with other students was in awe of their testimonies. This did two things for me. One, getting to know them or even about them meant getting to know God. The Lord became more real through their ministries to me. And secondly, parts of their stories confirmed parts of my own. When God spoke to me, it didn't seem strange any longer.

It was their prayer life they had in common. Their ministries were different. Their professional interests differed; their social circles and other friendships differed. Their personalities were as individual as their DNA. Praying does not change our basic personalities. Praying does not enrich us financially. Poor people pray and do not become rich. Praying, also, does not mean that our faith will suddenly be empowered to keep us in good health, nor does it mean that God cannot choose to call us home to Himself by any means He deems convenient. Praying does not guarantee a longer life no more than it denies it. God's prayer warriors leave us in auto accidents

and by disease. But this does not mean their prayer life was anything less than the deepest relationship possible with God while they were here. Like Enoch, whose name means “dedicated,” they walked with God. Their closeness to God now that they are with Him knows no limit.

Prayer provides us with an awareness of God and His faithfulness to us that is unattainable by any other means. A life given to talking to God is a life given to the quest to know Him ...and this is the truest theology of all.

Sad But True

Let me use the editorial “we” here. The sad truth is that many believers, through no choice of our own, have what I might call a surface christian experience. We simply do not know that there is a nearness to God worth pursuing. Perhaps, we have been frightened into thinking that—as the saying goes—“too spiritually minded means no earthly good.” It isn’t true just because we talk to God. Talking to the Lord adds meaning to this life. But our “happiness,” as we understand it, is redefined in the process from amusements to getting to know Him.

Perhaps, and this seems apparent primarily in the industrialized, high-tech world of North America and Europe, we are educated beyond a simple dependence on God. I apologize if I’m wrong. But many of us fail to know what prayer without ceasing offers. We don’t know that we can live in a constant awareness of the love of God, especially when tragedy comes our way and it counts the most to know He is near. We develop no serious hunger for the Word of God. We fail to understand that the Bible is

more than a collection of stories.

The Bible is in written form the powerful voice of God spoken to our need for Him. The Bible is the story of God's, how-be-it, broken relationship with His creation and the pain He carried through the centuries of human history because of it. Mankind was always religious but somehow we needed our props and relics to have a sense of the divine. We were too tightly tied to the physical or natural world (and some through science still are) to understand that God could be accessible through faithful worship of Him and Him alone. We haven't discovered the benefit of true prayer.

The Final Final Thought

My final, final thought is to remind all that prayer is primarily an opportunity to get closer to a God who wants us close. It should not be seen as a tool for prying miracles out of His hand. Our requests are important to God but they represent our dependence on Him and our need of Him. God meets our needs as a gift of His love and for the sake of the relationship we should be returning that love by thanking Him and wanting to know Him for Himself not for things we might get from Him. We need to beware objectifying God.

When I was a teen, our pastor would close each Sunday morning service with Psalms 19:14. It seems appropriate here also.

May these words of my mouth
and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,

LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

The Final Final ...Final Thought

Finally, yes, finally, I would be remiss not to share a thought worth considering. Is all this talk about enjoying the presence of God more likely to be experienced in one denomination over others?

No! I must maintain that knowing God is a matter of prayerful faithfulness to Him—not an aspect of one's denominational affiliation. All those who have discovered the Lord in the privacy of their prayer life whether they be Catholic or Protestant will find themselves in rich communion not only with God but also with each other. God's people, true believers in the death and resurrection of the Savior on their behalf, at some point will shed the doctrines that separate them. All ritual will inevitably merge into a simplicity of worship and believers will discover an expression of their love for God far more enduring than any church membership could provide.

We have often remarked approvingly that when we all gather around the Savior someday all the labels will come off. Flowing forth from the soul, as we draw closer to God, will be a fountain of praise, an exciting longing after God that will be our common worship. We will all eventually and ultimately be in that most holy place with God where this will define our ritual and our doctrine ..and denominationalism will become a mere footnote in the church's history of the presence of God among us.

A Wall

There is even now a line drawn in the sand of time, a

distinction clearly identifying a true believer, those who have found this personal relationship with God, from non-believers. True believers are those who pray.

This line will become a wall with time. The world will be polarized but not politically between liberal and conservative, not nationally among several forms of government. The peoples of the world will no longer be categorized by ideological differences and social strata. The divide will be between believer and non-believer.

The persecution of God's people on many levels is even now once again beginning to rewrite Fox's "Book of the Martyrs." Society looks upon us with a confused distain. As the Apostle Paul observed, "*Your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*"³¹⁷

Non-believers look at the fringes of our faith: at ritual and doctrine, at form and theology. But these aspects of our love for God, as important and real as they had been, are like withering autumn leaves. A new and eternal Spring morning will soon dawn and a new spirit of worship will be in bloom.

A. W. Tozier, a well-known American Christian pastor, author, and spiritual mentor, wrote, "*To be right with God has often meant to be in trouble with men.*" Make no mistake about it. Those who are "*right with God,*" who are the same as those who are "*in trouble with men*" are *those who pray.*

The true question of faith, then, that affirms the reality of God and where we stand with Him is a single enquiry,

"When was the last time you talked to God?"

³¹⁷ Colossians 3:3.

Appendix

There are also always a story or two like a rider to an omnibus spending bill that finds its way here simply because the writer wanted it included.

Thus Saith the Lord

I am not ready to resign myself to the idea that the Hebrew term דָּבַר for a prophetic utterance used primarily in the prophetic books but found sparingly elsewhere is just a synonym for “speaking” and that it is equal to the term אָמַר, “says.” In Haggai 2:9 in the New International Version [NIV] I believe there is a distinction lost in translation in the use of these words, דָּבַר, “declares” and אָמַר “says” the Lord.³¹⁸

‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ **says** the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ **declares** the Lord Almighty.”

For me, there is a difference that is more than a literary style—a difference that speaks to the very reason our Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was written in this language. God did not just “say” I will grant peace. To use the NIV’s word, God *declared* it so! But this reveals an emphasis not available in our language. If I had written a translation of this text and our Old Testament, I would be drawn to the idea of not translating the word [NIV “declared”] but maybe transliterating it only to introduce its true emphasis: Ni-ÚM.³¹⁹

The word originates from “to whisper,” an idea that has gotten lost in use—except for the NLT (New Living Translation) of Psalms 36:1- “*Sin whispers to the wicked, deep within their hearts.*” The problem with this translation from the NLT is not in the word “whisper” but the phrase

³¹⁸ Saith the Lord of Hosts: דָּבַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

³¹⁹ This word, דָּבַר, is a later word in our Bible not found in the first five books. It first appears in the Psalms—the reference in 2 Kings to Josiah corresponds to 1 Chronicles and is probably late.

“within their hearts.” The Hebrew reads “within my heart.” So, the NIV tries this: I have a message from God in my heart... It might still be a whisper (according to the NIV) from God but note: it resonates deep within the heart of David. We need not limit this word: Ni-ÚM could be a literal voice and does not need to be whispered but the word seems to suggest that this is a private message and a personal moment, a heart to heart thing.

Used by the prophets, it is a public echo from the prophet’s mouth or writings of something the Lord spoke to them in the heart and in secret. In the only verse in Proverbs where our word is used [Proverbs 30:1] it is translated “inspired utterances” in the NIV.

Ni-ÚM would be the perfect word-idea for a few scriptures that expound on this divine method of conversing with His servants.

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan [Hebrew: secret council; familiar converse, intimacy (with God)] to his servants the prophets. Amos 3:7

He says, “Be still [be quiet], and know that I am God Psalms 46:10

After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. I Kings 19:12

This personal conversation is implied in the Lord’s response to Josiah who wept to find the “Book of the Law” in the temple and who came humbly before God, penitent and vowing to read and follow it. Notice our word translated “declared” in the NIV.

Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, **declares** [Ni-ÚM] the LORD. 2 Kings 22:18-19

Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes

and wept in my presence, I have heard you, **declares** [Ni-ÚM] the LORD. 2 Chronicles 34:27

This is a very personal moment and message for the king of Judah from the King of Kings.

The only place in which the NIV breaks form but not meaning is Psalms 110:1 where in this prophetic reference is recorded a very personal conversation, one on one, heart to heart, between the Father and the Son:

The LORD **says** [Ni-ÚM] to my lord.

So, is there a difference in Haggai's prophecy between "says" and "declared" in 2:9? I believe there is. God said publicly, to all who had ears to hear that *'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house...'* But He declared [Ni-ÚM] *peace*. Is not the word "peace" a word spoken to the human heart of the listeners? When I tell my family I love them, even if in a public forum, it is a private word to their hearts and is said in a soft tone, not yelled. But the concept of a glorious house is something shouted from the roof tops—is it not!?

The Old Testament language is built on this personal level of conversation between two persons in relationship and that is why it works to express the deepest feelings and the ongoing dialog that reveals those feelings between God and His servant, or God and His people. He is a personal Lord!

Especially when my circumstance challenges my faith, I need Him to speak [Ni-ÚM] to me through prayer and my reading His Word.

God-sent Dreams

Does God speak to us in dreams?

“At times,” confessed Dr. Keener, “I have experienced the Lord speaking to me in dreams and found profound insights regarding His character or activity with regard to passages or themes in Scripture.”³²⁰

There is a Bible story told of Abraham and his young son, Isaac, ascending a mountain where Abraham—we are told—was instructed by God to offer the lad to God. [This meant Abraham was thinking of placing Isaac on a bonfire and sacrificing him to God like people then sacrificed lambs.] We do not doubt the details of this account as raw and unconscionable as it may sound to us. Song writer Billy Fields, however, interprets this event in a more acceptable way:

It's not your Isaac that God wants
He wants you.³²¹

God would not let Abraham go through with it, God was only testing him to see where Abraham's loyalties lay. God does not ask this of us, but in that culture and time it was a reasonable test.

There is the subtlest hint in the wording of Genesis 22:3, where this story is written, that this instruction was given Abraham in a dream.³²² (“Early the next morning

³²⁰ Keener, Craig S. *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecostal*. (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 2016) p 115.

³²¹ Writer-Billy Fields composed the song “When I Lay My Isaac Down” (Publisher-Fields for Harvest) See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75PJmVrKF38&list=WL&index=34>

³²² The language is in a narration style that suggests this. The grammatical construct is a ‘vav conversive’ or a conversational style connected by the word “and” suggesting an unbroken story line. וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֹקֶר וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-חַמְרוֹ

Abraham got up and ...") The Bible offers many examples of God relating His will or desire through a dream.³²³

A dream from God might be nothing more than an encouraging interlude³²⁴ in an otherwise overstressed situation.³²⁵ A dream can be an oasis in the desert, a time when the day's burdens can be dismissed 'with prejudice' so the following morning we may start fresh with a song in the heart, a quick step in our gait and an awareness that, in more than one way, it is a new day.

Sometimes a dream is just a dream, but on that rare occasion when God chooses, it may become a vehicle of communication that goes beyond the daytime resources of our encouragement. God in a dream can take us a level higher emotionally into the world of metaphor that is just as real to us (in REM sleep) but not hindered by the cultural and psychological restrictions that conscience imposes on our actions.³²⁶ In this world the impossible is expected, entertained, and lived out—where men fly from impending dangers, where romance is magical, where

³²³ One count offers 65 uses of the word "dream" in 55 different verses. An example is Joseph's dream. Biblical scholarship cannot deny this was God given. Genesis 37:5 Joseph had a dream, and ...he told it to his brothers... verse 7: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

³²⁴ Genesis 20:6 Then God said to him [Abimelech who would have wed Abraham's wife thinking it was his sister.] in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.

³²⁵ In Genesis 31:11 Jacob is encouraged in a dream to return home where he thinks his life is in danger. "The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.'" and verse 13: "go back to your native land."

³²⁶ Sometimes we recall them as feeling more intensely real than waking reality. It is as if, while dreaming, we are 'locked' in our dream, removed from the outside world, engaged in something important. And that is exactly the case....
ibid. (Kindle Locations 671-673).

heroism is the achievement of cowards. And, yes! Here God finds us uninfluenced by the advice and counsel of friends, Here God can reach us, if He chooses, floating free, not held down emotionally by the gravitational chains of preconceived notions, by the social restrictions our waking reality demands. (Trust your dreams to serve you even if—as is most common—you forget what you dreamed;³²⁷ you only know that you had a great night's sleep.)

Interpreting Dreams

Studying and interpreting dreams has a long history. The intensity and ubiquity of the dreaming experience made mankind certain that dreams were significant in some mysterious way.³²⁸ ... To the ancient Greeks, dream interpretation was almost an industry. At one time there were about 420 sleep temples; these were dedicated to Asclepius, an acclaimed healer....³²⁹

I had an aunt who enjoyed reading the tea grinds after a cup of hot tea. She would turn her emptied cup over and after a few seconds turn it right side up to read. I never placed any stock in this. She also believed in dream interpretation as well as a litany of old german superstitions shared by her mom, my beloved grandma, and some of her siblings. The obvious here is the belief that even in some incidental ways, we should be able to

³²⁷ Dr. Griffin, who is not concerned with divine revelations, tells us: ...it is actually important that we forget our dreams. When we are awake, the hippocampus, the conscious memory store, holds our memories of recent events and quickly deconstructs those memories and sends them to various parts of the cortex – the parts concerned with vision, hearing, touch, etc. – for storage. It does that to facilitate efficient pattern matching. But ... if the dream is allowed to be stored as a real memory, it will corrupt the memory store and greatly diminish our ability reliably to predict the outcome of similar experiences in the future. *ibid.* (Kindle Locations 976-980).

³²⁸ *ibid.* (Kindle Locations 678-679).

³²⁹ *ibid.* (Kindle Locations 673-674).

foresee a future event or two. There isn't much of a leap from this to building a religious mystic and even a ritual around this desire to know what will happen. The Oracles on Mount Olympus, Nostradamus' predictions, modern theories around the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, tantalize the minds and emotions of untold numbers of religious people.

Many ridicule such notions but buried in all this prophetic activity, might there be the occasional insight into reality. Many Christians believe that even today someone might be chosen by God to share His greater thoughts with us. Some maintain that there are even specific situations where God's people receive God's wisdom through a prophetic utterance. Particularly, is it reasonable to expect God to occasionally speak to an issue in a believer's life through a dream? I am not suggesting that this is a common occurrence, that God is chatty or that He uses this approach often in any one's experience. Much less, would I suggest that a religion should exist to champion this idea.

No! The occasional dream might speak to some psychological or emotional concern of the dreamer ..and it just might be with God's consent. Some dreams, like in the Biblical narrative, might be God's opportunity to address a deep seated or ongoing, potentially life changing or life directing issue. To what degree God might be thought to write, produce, or orchestrate the dream is not the question. I only ask: could God somehow use it to speak to us?

Keep in mind, I am not talking about some "higher power" concept as if God were a member of our imagined entourage of helper beings along with our childhood teddy

bear and baby blanket. The God I speak of here is a real, personal, Being. And there is reason for making this point: relationships are the product of two very real persons getting to know one another. God is not an 8 ball we shake or a fortune cookie to read, a crystal ball to consult, or Apple's "Siri" or Amazon's "Alexa" to charm us. He is a personal being we are wanting to get to know and have an ongoing relationship with as real as any relationship we have with anyone else. So, asking if *this* God can speak in dreams, I am asking if He might offer in real conversation or in a real personal line of communication, with us His advice or His instruction or His encouragement?

Dreams from God are biblical. They, in a way, bring God once more out of the shadows. If we believe this possible and believe we have that rare dream in mind, we may just have another instance when God touched our hearts and let us know of His concern and involvement in our lives.

I Had A Dream

In 1975, I returned to the Bible school campus, where I spent four years, to get my B.S. degree after the school received accreditation from the state to issue degrees. It was during a low point in my ministry. I had just left one ministry for another which would only last one year before we were moving again. In this morass of career changes, our marriage was floundering—as reluctant as I am to admit this.. I felt neglected—forgetting how neglected my wife must have felt. It was a selfish, every man for his own feelings, time. I lived with thoughts and feelings I never thought myself capable of back when I started this journey,

back when my innocent idealism reigned, back when my dream was my reality and I saw family and church as something beautifully sharing me in a symbiotic and inspired relationship. I had a lot to discover about everything.

If you believe in a devil, as I did—and do—this was his opportunity in my vulnerable state to suggest temporary solutions (the euphoric state of any temptation is temporary by its very nature).

No! I didn't have an affair! Problem here was I needed the "right" woman to have such a relationship with ..and I was already married to her. No! There were other problems as well: no money, a feeling of inferiority, which explains why I went back for the degree. I don't know what might have happened—as they say—"if." But I know what did happen. I had a dream ..and how appropriate: back in a dorm room where my journey as a clergyman began.

I was traveling alone by train to somewhere apparently unimportant since my dream didn't highlight that point. But I was alone; no one else was in that car with me when suddenly from the rear of this train appeared a dark faceless figure draped in black coming toward me. I instinctively knew it was Satan come to frighten me, assuming that fear, not respect, would make him king over my circumstances. I was indeed fearful. The dream was turning into a nightmare. I stepped backward hoping to escape his grasp dare he get close enough. I reached the end of the car behind me with nowhere to go, no retreat from the ghastly spectacle that was creeping ever closer.

Suddenly my feelings changed. Perhaps, it is true: never corner a rat or a frightened person who just might lunge

forward in a defensive posturing. Flee or fight, but I couldn't flee. But my fight was verbal. I stepped forward and in that instant I felt a surge of boldness, similar to back in seventh grade when a classmate wanted to goad me into a fight until I suddenly got into the spirit of his request and shoved him. I was ready now emotionally for battle. He backed off.

In this case, on the train, in my dream, I pointed at the devil and commanded him to "*get off this train.*" (This is a quote.) I stepped forward and he fled. I was resolved in that instance to throw him off if he didn't go on his own.

Just then I saw all in white a glorious vision which I identified in my dream as Jesus. In that moment it dawned on me the power I had over any temptation, any impulse to do wrong. I was not subject to this power. I was free to choose to do the right thing by family and church.

As often as I must have mentioned the power of truth, holy living, love, and all things godly over the tempter, these were sermons for others. Somehow I failed to hear them for myself. This dream would address that oversight. It was a "revelation" of sorts, absolutely biblically as well as psychologically sound, that I didn't need to bow to any thought, any drawing, that appeared overpowering. I could take charge and do what was right. I was encouraged.

I awoke.

I have had many dreams over the years which were psychologically soothing. I enjoyed many a night time in REM sleep where my world was more to my liking and where I was empowered to do things not possible while awake. But none of these I saw as coming from God. Not only was this "train" dream biblical and significant, the

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timing couldn't have been more fortuitous and providential.

Learning to Pray

Throughout this work, I have been dropping breadcrumbs hopefully leading to an understanding that praying is not a science nor an art. Prayer is not a theological treatise nor a special language as if God only hears us when we get the request politically correct. Prayer is a longing of the soul not the persuasiveness of words. Prayer is, in effect, the language of children, with all its fumbling at expression but set to the rhythm of an impetuous heart after God.

As David so apply stated,

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.³³⁰

The loftiest language may fail us. Prayer is not an intellectual pursuit nor are words in and of themselves significant to express an honest inquiry after God unless they reflect the soul and are such an investment in our life that if they fail us we find ourselves emotionally bankrupt and devoid of hope. Prayer should become so much a part of life that meeting God is as cherished as fresh air.

God is never obligated to respond to every prayer, however; for, every prayer is not prayer if it is a means for embellishing personal interests or a request without heart. There is, then, a context for prayer: *according to his will.*³³¹ And accordingly, *“we know that he hears us.”*³³²

On what does David base his assurance that his prayer reached God’s ear? The answer is simply: David needed

³³⁰ Psalms 42:1.

³³¹ I John 5:14.

³³² I John 5:15.

God and needed Him to be merciful. David sought after a God who wanted to be found. David gratefully acknowledged in prayer “a ... contrite heart you, God, will not despise.³³³ [therefore]...The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer.³³⁴

How

More than “what” to pray, then, we may need to learn “how” to pray or as one of Jesus’ disciples asked Him,³³⁵ “Teach us to pray.” It is, again, not a question of words. The heart of the “Our Father” is an inspirational seeking after God.

In his psalms David’s response to this God brings us vital insight into a prayer life that partners with God, that glorifies Him, and that strengthens David to serve God more faithfully.

This was a life long process. It began when the Lord went looking for David while he was yet a teen. David at a young age daydreamed of divine adventures, meditating on what little he must have then known about the God who sought him for the Judean throne.

The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart³³⁶

God found him tending his father’s flock³³⁷ and brought him as shepherd king to Jerusalem to tend His—God’s.

³³³ Psalms 51:17.

³³⁴ Psalms 6:9.

³³⁵ Luke 11:1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

³³⁶ I Samuel 13:14.

³³⁷ ! Kings 11:4 As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

David's Psalms are, therefore, a revelation of the man, a biographical look at the man, who learned over the years that God indeed hears when we pray. David's Psalms are the story of a dynamic prayer life. He sought God with tears.³³⁸

Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping.³³⁹

David was far from perfect. The chronicles of the king embarrassingly uncover the scandalous exploits of a man who seemed so easily tempted, whose spontaneous reactions to some situations had politically hurtful consequences.³⁴⁰ But he was quick to repent and beg God's forgiveness—which is what God looks for. Whatever the consequence of David's foolish choices.³⁴¹ His heart was desperate to hold unto God. Frantically, if needs be, he must not lose his friendship with God and the inner peace that it brought.

Seven

There are seven words in the New Testament language for "prayer"

³³⁸ Psalms 34:18 The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 51:17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise

³³⁹ Psalms 6:8.

³⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 24:15 So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died.

³⁴¹ 2 Samuel 24:10 David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."

vows,³⁴² prayers,³⁴³ requests,³⁴⁴ supplications,³⁴⁵ petitions,³⁴⁶
intercessions,³⁴⁷ and giving of thanks³⁴⁸

and scholarship teaches us that these are all the same prayer,

...on the distinction between these words...when all has been said, it will still to a great extent remain true that they will often set forth, not different kinds of prayer, but prayer contemplated from different sides and under different aspects.³⁴⁹

It seems best to me to describe prayer as “talking to God” but each of the seven terms, additionally, offers a perspective worth mentioning.

1. Vows

The word *Vow* is a biblical word for prayer that at first glance seems of little import; after all, it is used only once in the New Testament meaning “prayer” and even there scholarship offers little reason why it should replace the more general term for prayer I discuss in the next section.

A vow is a promised commitment—in prayer to God. As such vows should never be spoken recklessly and without forethought. *“It is a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one’s vows,”*³⁵⁰ Solomon warned. As another translation³⁵¹ reads, *“Don’t trap yourself by making a rash promise to God and only later counting the*

³⁴² εὐχή

³⁴³ προσευχή

³⁴⁴ δέησις

³⁴⁵ ἱκετηρία

³⁴⁶ αἴτημα

³⁴⁷ ἔντευξις

³⁴⁸ εὐχαριστία

³⁴⁹ Richard C. Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) p 192

³⁵⁰ Proverbs 20:25.

³⁵¹ NLT New Living Translation.

cost."

We make promises to God without realizing it when our pain, anxieties, or fears drive us to it. Bartering is said to be the third stage of grief.

In one Psalm,³⁵² perhaps written by Solomon, the Psalmist offers one of the few insights into this word for prayer.

LORD, remember David and all his **self-denial**. He swore an oath to the LORD, he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:

The Greek translation reads, "*Lord, remember David and all his meekness how he ... vowed to the God of Jacob.*" The word "meekness" is in many versions translated "affliction" (or as here: "self-denial") and it is understood to be a "self-imposed trouble" which David endured because he promised God a Temple: "*in order to procure a worthy abode for the sanctuary of Jahve [Jehovah]*"³⁵³

Affliction, self-denial, self-imposed trouble, meekness are the colored rings circling the bull's eye. David's prayer took a turn from asking for deliverance from his enemies or forgiveness for his unfaithfulness. He promised to build God a house, a temple, even though God had not wanted him to build it. David was a man of war and God wanted it built during a time of peace. But David blurted out in a spirit of rash gratitude that he wanted to do this for God.

"Meekness" is not the favored translation³⁵⁴ (though, it is my favorite based on the Greek). David was driven by the desire to please God ...and that is what "meekness" is. His

³⁵² Psalms 132:1-2.

³⁵³ Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (Erldmann Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI. 1980) vol V. p 310.

³⁵⁴ The Greek term has no exact Hebrew equivalent but the PUAL form used here represents self-imposed troubles. The LXX translators have cause to use the word "meekness" here.

meekness or desire to serve God brought David to promise God a House, a Temple. The Temple was delegated to his son, Solomon, to erect but David's dedication to the Lord, God's Word, and this project is in his Psalms everywhere in evidence. David vowed,

I will allow no sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.³⁵⁵

James, Jesus' brother, spoke of a vow (in our sole New Testament reference) as a "*prayer offered in faith [that] will make the sick person well.*"³⁵⁶

Most scholars gloss over this as just another word for prayer. But perhaps the sick, too, make promises in their need that they should be serious about fulfilling and this word for prayer still carries that shade of meaning.

Or perhaps, it is better to understand our faith as a commitment to be faithful to God. Prayer that is acceptable to God comes from a life dedicated to serve Him. This should go without saying. We bring to Him our needs and it would be presumptuous and an affront to His mercy to assume we should ask anything of Him without the accompanying desire to please Him in the asking.

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.³⁵⁷

2. Prayers

The word "Prayers" is an advancement on a vow since this word speaks always and only of a prayer made to The Lord, Himself: "*the word being restricted to sacred uses.*"³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Psalms 132:4-5.

³⁵⁶ James 5:15.

³⁵⁷ Psalms 37:4.

³⁵⁸ Richard C. Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) p 190

Chris Tomlin, put this prayer to music:

Here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you're my God,³⁵⁹

(There is another word for prayer that speaks to the *content* of the prayer, i.e.. the request. This is an important distinction worthy our attention later.)

Scholarship calls our word here: “*a pious conversation.*”³⁶⁰ I reduce the technical language down to simply *talking to God* with this added notation found too frequently in the New Testament to be ignored: *in the spirit*.

Talking to God “in the Spirit” is little considered theologically except by pentecostals but even a cursory review of the scriptures referencing this connection will show that “in the Spirit” is a vital aspect of praying that all believers should be engaged in. For me the phrase means actually conversing with God with a listening heart as opposed to venting complaints or pushing our opinion on Him as we often do with each other. Prayer should be a dialogue and an open communication between us and God. Prayer is “spiritual” not just verbal—certainly not “mechanical” like reading a scripted prayer.

This word for prayer is also in the context of spiritual warfare and spiritual struggles. God’s primary interest—if not His only interest—is our *spiritual* welfare, not financial or physical. For these, we have *requests*, but there has to be a time for God alone and His concern for our developing relationship with Him.

³⁵⁹ Christopher Dwayne Tomlin is an American contemporary Christian music artist, worship leader, and songwriter from Grand Saline, Texas, United States...

³⁶⁰ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). Vol II p 807.

When we are in trouble, we need to talk to Him.

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.³⁶¹

This becomes an ongoing conversation in this life because trouble follows all of us.³⁶² Life is not without its challenges and its sorrows. Our word is also the best term to describe intercessory prayer (after an Old Testament use.)³⁶³

Brothers and sisters, pray for us.³⁶⁴

Our Christian walk and our faith are the spiritual side of this life and we are not paranoid in knowing that there is armed against us a spiritual opposition.³⁶⁵ And it is because the battle is spiritual, our prayer life must be spiritually empowered. Our prayer for one another is the primary weapon we wield against such a foe. We must discover what praying “in the spirit” is all about. Prayer needs to be more than words. Prayer must have a spiritual dimension to it as much as worshipping God does.³⁶⁶ To paraphrase Jesus: *God is a spirit and they who pray must pray in the spirit....*

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹ James 5:13.

³⁶² I Timothy 2:8 Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.

I Thessalonians 5:17 pray continually.

³⁶³ The Hebrew Word for prayer [פָּרַחַתָּ] the reflexive means intercessory prayer Deuteronomy 9:20 And the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.

³⁶⁴ I Thessalonians 5:25.

³⁶⁵ Ephesians 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

³⁶⁶ John 4:24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

³⁶⁷ Ephesians 6:18.

“Praying in the Spirit” is an oft used phrase in a number of epistles which indicates it was already theologically significant.³⁶⁸

Pentecostals see this as speaking in tongues but I think it much more. It speaks to a “spiritual” dimension to prayer—sometimes more discernible in burdens, groaning, tears, and contriteness—that goes beyond words. It is more than emotions; it is a dynamic to our prayer life where the heart is open and we are in communion with God. True prayer is communion with God³⁶⁹—and this can be in our spoken language. But, again, it is not the words that matter as much as the heart that conveys them.

“Praying in the Spirit” is the part we play in partnership with God in confronting evil. God responds to prayer when our hearts are into cooperating with Him (Christians use the phrase “yielding to Him”). The injunction to *pray in the Spirit*, according to the Apostle Paul, follows on his description of the armor of a believer against assaults of evil. Dr. J Vernon McGee referred to this as *“lay[ing] hold of God for spiritual resources.”* Spiritual warfare requires spiritual praying to have an effective offensive strategy against all that challenges our interest in drawing closer to the Lord and serving Him.

Praying in the Spirit is not a matter of words necessarily.

³⁶⁸ Jude 1:20 praying in the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals see this as a form of speaking in tongues but “wordless groans” is also a possible description. I Corinthians 14:15 I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.

³⁶⁹ Jesus transfigured on the mount before Peter, James, and John is to me an example of the highest level of such a communion. It is possible in prayer to get a glimpse of this reality only we would sense that we have been in communion with God, not Elijah. Mark 9:1-4.

We may not have the words but our desire is to meet with God. The heart is drawn toward Him. We still want Him to inquire after what we may not even be able to put voice to.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.³⁷⁰

We may start by verbally stumbling along in desperation but soon tearfully words fail us. The heart is overwhelmed and language cannot suffice to express our thoughts. We must pray *in the spirit*.

Pentecostal folk enjoin us to seek to identify such spoken sounds and syllables as might express the heart's cry. (This also was part of the Early Church's experience in prayer; so, it is not frowned on here.) But there is no magic in words, understood or not understood. It is the language of the contrite heart before God that catches His ear. Talk to Him! Cry before Him! Tell Him you don't have the words. Sometimes it is no more than the sounds of our grief and brokenness that is all God needs to hear. He can interpret it:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes [meets with God] for us through wordless groans.³⁷¹

Temptation is a major part of this war on evil we must wage. Jesus cautioned His disciples during His passion to "*Pray that you will not fall into temptation.*"³⁷² Prayer and yielding to temptation never go together. While we are talking to God, we are insulated from giving in to temptation. When we are tempted to sin, it is strategically important to tell God about it—to call on Him when we are

³⁷⁰ Psalms 73:25.

³⁷¹ Romans 8:26.

³⁷² Luke 22:40.

most vulnerable.

We don't need to be falling off the cliff to cry out to God. It might be wise to talk to Him about the path to avoid the cliff altogether. Before any major decision, Jesus would discuss matters with His heaven Father:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.³⁷³

When Jesus was praying in private, his disciples at times were with him which tells me that we can get alone with God even in a crowd.³⁷⁴

And sometimes prayer is meant to go public, we come as a group to talk to God. Why should one soldier go it alone. Move as an army! God believes in advancing reinforcements.

When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.³⁷⁵

One more thing from the Beatitudes. I like to paraphrase Jesus' instruction to his disciples in response to persecution and the day He gave them the secret to their happiness as believers. I translate the word *pray* here: *talk to God*.

*"But I tell you, love your enemies and concerning those who persecute you? talk to God. Tell Him all about it."*³⁷⁶

You will know that you have indeed prayed in the spirit, because you will know that you have indeed met with God and that He heard you.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask

³⁷³ Luke 6:12.

³⁷⁴ Luke 9:18.

Luke 9:28, 29 About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning

³⁷⁵ Acts 20:36. See also Acts 14:23; 16:25

³⁷⁶ Matthew 5:44 pray for those who persecute you

anything according to his will, he hears us.³⁷⁷

3. Requests

The word “Requests” is our list of needs. If the Lord had not commissioned this word as a term for prayer, we might have thought, based on the general term for prayer already described, that it would be wrong to give God our list of needs as we see them. God reads the heart—to be sure—but there is added reason for telling Him where it hurts, even if we might misdiagnose our need. In a childlike fashion our ability to know where and why we hurt is not always clear to us; so, telling God about our “need” as we understand it might be merely a cry for help. But this is what He wants to hear. The basic thing here is that we are talking to Him! And God’s desire to hear us out is not restricted or limited by the accuracy of our knowledge or theology.

There is reason why we should try to spell it out to Him. Not every prayer is “Lord, Thy will be done.” Jesus asked a man infirm 38 years, and lying near the Pool of Bethesda, “*Do you want to get well?*”³⁷⁸ “Thy will be done” is not the answer. If we know what our need is, we’ll know when God has met it.

The Bible story is told of a man born blind to whom Jesus gave sight and then disappeared into the crowd before the man could probably get more than a passing glimpse of Him. This man, now seeing, was questioned by the religious authorities who sought to accuse Jesus of unethical if not illegal acts. After an intense and drawn out

³⁷⁷ I John 5:14.

³⁷⁸ John 5:6.

interrogation, that brought the man's parents in as character witnesses and to confirm his blindness, the man, no doubt angered by the badgering, replied concerning Jesus, "*Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!*"³⁷⁹ He didn't know who healed him. He didn't know the baker, but was enjoying the cookies.

Did this man know that he had a "need" to see? He hadn't lost his sight. There is nothing in the story to suggest that the man begged Jesus for healing. It seems Jesus was having a theological debate with His disciples over the relationship between sin and sickness when a blind man became the example of how "*the works of God should be made manifest in him.*"³⁸⁰ The story has a happy ending. The man ran into Jesus later and was introduced to the One who gave him his sight.

If we don't see the need, how would we know that it was met by God? How could we give the Lord the credit, the praise, for healing us?

"Need" is not necessarily physical but can be. The Apostle Peter says plainly, "*...the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer*"³⁸¹ [request, need]."

The word "request" is a good translation because this prayer includes our *wants* as well. This is to be distinguished from the word "needs" in the Apostle Paul's reassuring promise, "*my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*"³⁸² These are

³⁷⁹ John 9:25.

³⁸⁰ John 9:3.

³⁸¹ 1 Peter 3:12

³⁸² Philippians 4:19.

necessities whereas the request is anything we ask of God. *Requests* are what we desire of Him ...and, let me say it plainly, He wants us to ask of Him what we desire!

The Apostle Paul confirmed this biblical truth to the Corinthian church which probably knew less about Paul's needs than most churches, *But prayer is prayer.*

you help us by your prayers³⁸³

James, the brother of Jesus, asked us to list our requests for one another based on our confessions. Analogously speaking, we are seated on Jesus's knee and He is asking us, "What can I give you for your life?" This is not unlike God.

That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."³⁸⁴

The difficulty with James' words is that we do not know for sure whether he is talking about spiritual or physical needs—or, for that matter, financial, emotional, whatever. But we do not need to know. The beauty of a request is that it can be all inclusive. When God touches the body, He touches the soul.

James adds this note:

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.³⁸⁵

Words like "powerful" and "effective" underscore the importance of asking God to give us what we desire. Yes, confession, repentance, seeking His mercy are all conditions of the heart of the one praying that empowers such prayers, but these are basically "wants" we are asking of the Divine Heart.

The simple truth here is that God wants us to talk to Him. He doesn't grade our knowledge about our needs

³⁸³ 2 Corinthians 1:11.

³⁸⁴ 2 Chronicles 1:7.

³⁸⁵ James 5:16.

separate from our wants. We often in self-interest mixed these up and even misrepresent our own heart. We may not even know what we want. He doesn't grade us. He only cares that we bring these matters to His attention.

Often God awaits our request before giving us blessings He intended to give us all along. The difference is that now the blessing is in the open—not given in such secrecy we confuse God's grace with good fortune. A larger part of life is the natural consequence of our circumstances—for good and bad. The rain falls on both the just and unjust and even believers can expect to reap what they sow. But for God's children, it doesn't end here. There is a prayer request that can overrule circumstances! Talk to Him about these matters. Telling God all about it, where it hurts, brings peace. The Apostle Paul assures us: "... present your requests to God and the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."³⁸⁶

4. Supplications

The word "Supplications" (some translate "petitions") is found only once in our New Testament but well worth the study. It was said of Jesus that

During the days ... on earth, he offered up prayers and **petitions** [our word: supplications] with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.³⁸⁷

Scholarship calls this word "*the olive-branch bound round with white wool, held forth by the suppliant.*"³⁸⁸ "...suppliants

³⁸⁶ Philippians 4:6-7.

³⁸⁷ Hebrews 5:7.

³⁸⁸ Aeschylus, Eumen. 43, 44; compare Virgil, aen. viii. 116: 'Paciferaeque manu ramum praetendit olivae;' κλάδος ἀπὸ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἐλαίας ἐρίῳ λευκῷ κατεστεμμένος - holding an olive-branch entwined with white wool.

approached the one whose aid they would implore holding an olive branch entwined with white wool and fillets, to signify that they came as suppliants."³⁸⁹ The olive branch is used to denote a request for protection.³⁹⁰ Another scholar adds, "...approaching the one whose aid they would implore."³⁹¹ Supplication is, therefore, the defining moment when the supplicant surrenders unconditionally to one that is sought for their help. The battle for them is over. Their resources spent, they resolve to hold on in their own strength now past, they give themselves over to another for protection.

The *context* of the Savior's prayer is not only necessary to understand its meaning but to understand why it is never used in the New Testament in reference to our praying.

Reverend Chuck Smith calls Jesus' prayer here "*a reference to Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane when He wept before God.*"³⁹² This is not meant to be a study of Jesus' passion, but the more we understand His agony, the

The only references in the Old Testament worth looking into do not draw out the meaning of this word as clearly and emphatically as does this reference in the Gospels.

And God speaking to Job scolded.

Job 41:3 (LXX 40:22) Will it [Leviathan] keep begging you for mercy [make supplication to you]?

Now just what the leviathan is, they're not quite sure. Some think that it is perhaps a crocodile, some think that it's perhaps even a dragon, while others think that it perhaps is a hippopotamus with a hefty hide. And so those are some of the opinions.

³⁸⁹ see <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G2428&t=KJV>

³⁹⁰ see Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol III. p 297.

³⁹¹ Joseph Thayers. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*. (Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) p 301.

³⁹² Chuck Smith. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/c2000_Hbr/Hbr_005.cfm?a=1138007

more we will understand his supplication. It was as a supplicant He cried *"Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."*³⁹³ According to the Apostle John's witness, His soul was "heavy."³⁹⁴ John Mark, who might have recorded the Apostle Peter's recollection, recalled Jesus adding, *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."*³⁹⁵

Words fail us here. The Apostle Matthew recalled that our Savior was in pain and distress. Jesus' reaction in that moment seemed desperate to find another way, a plan 'B' for our Salvation. But there was none. The Apostle John remembered Jesus remarking, *"It was for this hour that I came into the world....."*³⁹⁶

This word for "supplication" is not used to signify our prayer life because He suffered so we would never have to suffer for our sinfulness. Jesus came to the end of His resources so that our supply would be infinite and eternal.³⁹⁷

(It is believed by some, including myself, that Jesus' death was inevitable at this point. His strength and endurance was spent. His heart physically ruptured on the cross.) He now collapsed into the Father's will for our Salvation. He came to the end of His road so that a road would be eternally laid before us to walk down.³⁹⁸ Jesus,

³⁹³ Matthew 26:39.

³⁹⁴ John 12:27-28.

³⁹⁵ Mark 14:34.

³⁹⁶ John 12:27.

³⁹⁷ Ephesians 2:7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

³⁹⁸ Isaiah 35:8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

as we know, was providing for our redemption.

This does not mean we should not pray for God's protection or that we should not surrender unconditionally to God's grace. We should. But God's protection for the believer is a given³⁹⁹ because of Jesus' death and resurrection. If we feel that circumstances have made us a supplicant, God would understand that, too. As a supplicant we recognized that our own resources are depleted, our strength exhausted, and our tolerance to suffering exceeded and we now live or die on an absolute dependence on God. David adjured,

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him [LXX 36:7: supplicate Him] ; do not fret when people ... carry out their wicked schemes.⁴⁰⁰

5. Petitions

Praying, we learn so far by a study of the terms used, is a conversation that respects God's Holiness (in the spirit) while sharing our own hearts (our wants and needs) with Him, who is the God who walks beside. But there are three more aspects to a dynamic prayer life, of our communion with God. Prayer includes additionally petitions. Prayer is petitionary.

The word "Petitions" is not much different from "requests." The distinction is easily lost especially where their meanings overlap. It might be easier to call "petition" the more general term that includes requests.

But whereas a request is for a particular desire, a petition is a more general request for God to bring a certain

³⁹⁹ Psalms 91:1 Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

⁴⁰⁰ Psalms 37:7.

condition or circumstance to pass. A petition is a believer's way of asking the Lord to strengthen their faith and their commitment to follow Christ. Petitionary prayer is prayer that asks for grace and mercy. Petitionary prayer requisitions God's help for tomorrow's challenges. The best examples of these are the last four parts of the Lord's Prayer:

1. Give us today our daily bread
2. Forgive us our debts
3. Lead us not into temptation
4. Deliver us from the evil one.

Only the first petition here is material; the other three are clearly three aspects of one spiritual matter. Lord, May your grace rescue me from Satan's design on my life; may I follow your lead away from him; and where I fall off the path, help me to rise and find the way again. Teach me to recognize in my life Your forgiveness, Your leadership and Your deliverance.

A prayer for a particular healing would be a request but if I am asking God for the physical health and strength to do something He asks of me, that would be a petition. Praying for God's peace on receiving a poor prognosis from the doctor is an understandable request. It becomes a petition if I am asking God to let this news draw me closer to Him.

The New International Version translation of the Bible of Philippians 4:6 flips the English translation (but not the meanings) because of the overlap.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

In our use of terms here, this verse reads: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and request, with thanksgiving, present your petitions to God."* Paul's fatherly instruction to the Philippians encouraged

them not to live in anxiety and worrying about everything. “*but in every situation, by prayer*” give God your list of wants, “*with thanksgiving*”, petition His mercy and grace.⁴⁰¹

Perhaps this sheds light on something the Apostle John observed in his own experience:

And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.⁴⁰²

I prefer the translation

And if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.⁴⁰³

A prayer life that is a desire to serve the Lord more faithfully, which is what petitionary prayer represents, God will always honor.

6. Intercessions

The word “Intercessions” is an incorrect translation of the word used in the Bible. The word originally meant “*to fall in with a person, to draw close to him so as to enter into familiar speech and communion with him.*”⁴⁰⁴ In terms of praying, this prayer means simply to meet with God and converse with Him as God.

Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding [meeting with God] for us.

The word implies a “freedom”⁴⁰⁵ and boldness of

⁴⁰¹ Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition [δέησις], with thanksgiving, present your requests [αἴτημα] to God.

⁴⁰² I John 5:15.

⁴⁰³ King James Version.

⁴⁰⁴ Richard C. Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) p 189

⁴⁰⁵ Joshua 10:12 reads: On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua **said to the LORD** in the presence of Israel: “**Sun, stand still** over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.”

access."⁴⁰⁶ As the writer to the Hebrews confirms: *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*⁴⁰⁷

Not every reference to this form of prayer is clear, however. The Apostle Paul surprised me when he explained in his instruction to Timothy who was pastoring in the city of Ephesus:

...everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God **and prayer**.⁴⁰⁸

There was at the time a Gnostic religious practice of calling what nourished the body the work of Demiurgus, *"an artisan-like figure responsible for fashioning and maintaining the physical universe."*⁴⁰⁹ One commentary reads, *"Abstinence from marriage and meats formed the distinctive marks of this and kindred ascetic sects."*⁴¹⁰

There is no controversy here regarding the word "everything." Paul was simply stating a universal principle repudiating the claim of the Gnostics. This doesn't mean that everything is edible. My interest is drawn, however, to the word "prayer" which is probably a customary prayer spoken at dinner,⁴¹¹ but if so, why this word to describe it? Why refer here to prayer as approaching the Lord at meal?

In some way, might "grace" at table be a time to invite the Lord to the meal? The basic meaning of this word for

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ Hebrews 4:16.

⁴⁰⁸ I Timothy 4:4-5.

⁴⁰⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demiurge>

⁴¹⁰ John Peter Lange. *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1980) Vol 11. p49.

⁴¹¹ I corinthians 10:30 I take part in the meal with thankfulness

prayer is “to approach God” and it carries a certain attitude of familiarity. Grace at table is a time to approach God with thanksgiving for His provision. This word for prayer in this way fits the context but an advance on this idea would be to invited God to dinner. By such a prayer, we retain a sense of gratefulness and even community throughout the meal. If Gnosticism made abstinence into a religion, why cannot christianity view the meal as a time of fellowship with God and one another?

This word is not an Old Testament word for prayer but the Apostle Paul still saw it in Elijah’s despondent dialogue with the Lord toward the end of the prophet’s life.

The scripture says concerning Elijah that

...he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”⁴¹²

This is a very personal moment for the prophet with the only one who he feels would listen to and console him. As far as ministry was concerned, he was through. Here is how the Apostle Paul saw it:

“...what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he **appealed** to God against Israel.”⁴¹³

The word “appealed” is this word for prayer ..and this makes sense. In the prophet’s darkest hour, he sought an audience with God and God met him there. Elijah didn’t have anything good to say about Israel but it was not a desire to pronounce judgment on the nation but a resignation to a failed effort to lead them to return to God.

⁴¹² I Kings 19:9-10.

⁴¹³ Romans 11:2.

The prophet was wrong about so much but God is, as Paul noted, “the God of all comforts”⁴¹⁴ and He is, as such, very approachable. That’s the message in this word for prayer.

7. Thanksgiving

The word “Thanksgiving” needs no explanation. When I pray, I must minimize the complaints. I, also, never want to accuse God of not caring. If I do, I am immediately penitent because I recognize in that moment how the heart has changed and somehow the consolation and assurance prayer offers is missing. An ungrateful heart or attitude is grossly inappropriate and unfair when we are meeting with the Lord.

Fourteen times in his letters the Apostle Paul underscores the importance of having a grateful heart, a hopeful perspective on our circumstances that is spontaneously recalling past blessings, a mindset that leaves bitterness outside the prayer chamber.⁴¹⁵ Thanksgiving is “*the grateful acknowledgment of past mercies, as distinguished from the earnest seeking of future [ones].*”⁴¹⁶

Not only, but prayer without thankfulness is disarmed

⁴¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

⁴¹⁵ The Bible is serious about the benefit and importance of gratefulness even regarding our thoughts on those who do not call us friend.

I Peter 3:9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Matthew 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

⁴¹⁶ Richard C. Trench. *Synonyms of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) p 192

against an assault by the worries of the day. Paul reminds us to “*in every situation, by prayer*” give God our list of concerns, “*with thanksgiving*”⁴¹⁷ if we want to be at peace while we petition Him.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.⁴¹⁸

Paul compared the value of Faith, Hope and Love in writing the church body at Corinth, calling Love the greatest.⁴¹⁹ We like to imagine that he was referencing the eternal quality of love whereas Faith and Hope serve us in this life alone. The same can be said of prayer. “*There remains these six qualities of prayer: vowing, requesting, supplicating, petitioning, interceding, and giving of thanks. But the greatest of these is “giving of thanks.”*”

Amen!

Praise and glory

and wisdom and thanks and honor

and power and strength

be to our God for ever and ever

Amen!”⁴²⁰

Some skeptics mock the believers’ imagination that heaven will be one eternal praise and worship service. This sounds boring since in this life even christians are into more self-centered interests, personal moments, focused concerns and, yes, ..well, the occasional sin. Life is more diverse than a single interest provides. Our attention is frequently redirected—or interrupted, if you prefer—to many and various, more sparkling glitter.

⁴¹⁷ Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition [δέησις], with thanksgiving, present your requests [αἴτημα] to God.

⁴¹⁸ Colossians 3:15.

⁴¹⁹ I Corinthians 13:13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

⁴²⁰ Revelation 7:12.

But the skeptic has lost sight of the reality under the surface of this churning sea of desires, down where deeper waters run quietly and eternally. If anything is temporary, it is harboring hateful thoughts and being self-absorbed because the energy curve to maintain these is enormous. People hide hateful feelings, greed, and a loveless pride. We tend here to hypocritically carry false smiles about to keep them hidden, but this is emotionally strenuous and an impossibly heavy weight to carry for any length of time. Living the lie about one's true feelings costs more—far, far more—than learning to be thankful.

There are a few aspects of our humanity that seem to have an endless source of energy. There are interests we can identify in our love of nature, of greenery and the colors of Spring,, of fresh air and blue sky—to name a few—that never change, never wane, never fail to draw us to the beaches, to the mountains and to the fields of flowers growing wild that in some fashion remain always and ever hypnotic and addictive. If these are unchanged in this life, what evidence might there be that these are still temporary sources of our happiness?

None. Quite the opposite. What God has made will never cease to awe us and it is a grateful heart that knows this. My imagination excites me to picture a praise service in the hereafter that is not just giving God a well deserved standing ovation but a praise service that is filled with the testimonies of the saints and of Jesus' explanations that finally grout the loose bricks of past blessings with God's work on our behalf—once unseen, but now, at last, made

known and complete.⁴²¹

Peace

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.⁴²²

I received a phone call from a friend who had just been told he had cancer. He wanted to talk to me because I, too, got the same news in 2008. We both went into surgery and are survivors today, but his call was probably prompted by the same kind of anxiety I felt when my doctor's office shared the news with me. In my situation, I called on God for His peace to quiet my thoughts and keep them positive. I googled my cancer to find out that there was a one percent chance it was anaplastic which is most of the time terminal. My otolaryngologist scolded me straight but before then I needed God to embrace my mind with His sense of reality. I was imagining the worst.

Solomon cautioned, "*Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.*"⁴²³ And I wish dealing with worry were that simple. David felt his worst worries were self-inflicted. He penitently confessed, "*I am troubled by my sin.*"⁴²⁴ Or he worried for his life every Spring when nations went to war, which is a well justified concern.

But no one was pursuing me to harm me—unless I assign anthropomorphic expression to cancer. And I think it wrong for us to live under the dark cloud of self-

⁴²¹ I Corinthians 13:12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

⁴²² Philippians 4:6. μηδὲν μερομνᾶτε ἀλλ' ἐν παντί τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ δεήσει μετὰ εὐχαριστίας τὰ αἰτήματα ὑμῶν γνωρίζεσθω πρὸς τὸν θεόν

⁴²³ Proverbs 12:25.

⁴²⁴ Psalms 38:18.

condemnation as a ready made reason why we worry. Perhaps, in a theological sense we might say that worry is a consequence of our first parent's biting into forbidden fruit in Eden. I'll leave that with you, but I needed help not explanations!

"*The New Testament,*" to quote scholarship, "*realizes that human life is swayed by care. For ... life is in fact controlled by that for which, about which, after which, before which, and concerning which [one] cares.*"⁴²⁵

I tend to worry about a lot of possible outcomes especially those I imagine could hurt my family or cause them harm. I worry about my granddaughters who drive; I worry about my sons' employment opportunities; I worry about my wife's eventual widowhood (should Jesus tarry); I worry about every little twinge or jab or sting some nerve announces that I never, ever had before; I worry because of my asthma: I worry that when I die, I'll stop breathing and that I will know it. (Don't laugh!)

The Pauline solution to too much mental pre-occupation with futures that cannot or will not happen is the same as that of the Apostle Peter or Jesus: *redirect the concern!* If we must care, let's concern ourselves with something worthy such constant attention.

Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?⁴²⁶
But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.⁴²⁷

The good news about the Bible word for this mindset, regardless how intense, *care, concern, dread, worry, anxiety, angst, fear*, is that the Bible word encompasses the entire

⁴²⁵ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol IV. p 591-2.

⁴²⁶ Matthew 6:27.

⁴²⁷ Matthew 6:33.

gambit of brooding over speculative and questionable outcomes. God's Word does not split hairs over labels with our trepidations. God will bring calm to the earthquake inside us that is ripping our peace apart if only we talk to Him about it.

Sadly, unreasonable and unwarranted concern can degenerate eventually into a fearful anticipation of the worse case scenario. We are, instead, encouraged through the promises of God's Word to meditate rather on the blessings of God that are, as we know, inevitable for all believers.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.⁴²⁸

Trying to console by urging "*Don't worry!*" is no substitute for prayer. A diagnosis of cancer—and for that matter all earthshaking surprises of bad times ahead—may trigger a justifiable concern. We need to find a peace that can shelter us from these emotional and mental storms. We need to find acceptance in some situations and in others a more hopeful anticipation of better days to come. We need a peace immune to bad news so that we are not reliant on good times for a sense of our happiness. We need to talk to God!

A Refuge in a Storm

Let's look at Philippians 4:6 more closely. When Paul cautioned, "*Do not be anxious about anything*" he was drawing our attention to this monster that we imagine gobbling up all our tomorrows and regurgitating them as some nightmarish, frightfully abhorrent, dead future.

"Do not be anxious BUT ..." Here is a good place for an

⁴²⁸ I Peter 5:7.

inspiring “*but*”.

Generally we give the good news and the *but* is followed by all the bad exceptions. God does the opposite. David learned that with God

...weeping⁴²⁹ may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

“*But,*” Paul continued, “*in every situation...*” (When is a hyperbole actually not a hyperbole? Every? Every!) Every situation that causes us to worry is a candidate for prayer.

“Be anxious for nothing... but *by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving...*” Paul encouraged the believer to discuss these matters with God. Each of these three words contribute to God’s solution to our unwelcome pre-occupations.

“*Prayer*” is communing with God. We come before Him because He is merciful and the giver of grace. It might seem a small distinction to make here but our Lord is the expert counselor in these matters; He is—my analogy—the plumber to call when our pipes have burst. He is not just God in some omnipotent sense. This is why He is in our lives in the first place—to turn anxieties into peace.

“*Petitions*” here is the word “requests” and speaks to specific needs and wants. What exactly do we fear? What exactly is causing us to worry? This might not be easy to identify that is why Paul began by calling for “prayers.” We may not know exactly what we need or what to say, but let’s talk to Him about it all. We must meet with Him. We will let God know as best we can what is bothering us, robbing our sleep, making us anxious, stealing our peace.

“*With thanksgiving.*” It is important to recall times in the past when God was faithful in such situations. Or we

⁴²⁹ Psalms 30:5.

should recollect in other ways that He was faithful or merciful or gracious to us. Don't fail to bring these up while talking to Him.

"Present," is better translated "to make known" to God our petitions. When the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem intending to eventually imprison the entire Judean nation in a foreign captivity, the Judean king, Hezekiah, receiving the Assyrian threat in a letter, took it and showed it to God for Him to read for Himself⁴³⁰

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord....

It is important to know God as a friend we can in a very human fashion confide in. This helps us to be conscious of God's presence because it provides the human context, the one we live in, when we pray. The theology says He is omniscient and this does not support our need to get personal with the God of love who desires to be personal with us. I am reminded of the Lord's own words,

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.⁴³¹

"Your requests." What exactly do we want from God? Sometimes, it is not rescue we want as much as a desire for peaceful acceptance of our situation. I prayed once for healing for an octogenarian who interrupted me in mid sentence with her own petition to God to allow her to go home to be with Him. And God soon after granted her request.

A friend from years back recently posted on Facebook an update about his cancer. He reassures us all saying,

I derive enormous strength from reading scripture and interfacing

⁴³⁰ Isaiah 37:14-20.

⁴³¹ Revelation 3:20.

with God (i.e., prayer.)⁴³²

Charles Spurgeon in an 1879 sermon⁴³³ on Philippians 4:6 said of God,

He has set up a mercy seat, blood besprinkled; and he has prepared a High Priest, ever living to make intercession; and to these he has added the Holy Ghost to help our infirmities and to teach us what we should pray for as we ought. Everything is ready, and God waits for us to enquire at his hands.

There is no substitute for an awareness of God's peaceful presence that brings rest to the soul. We have an equal right to claim God's promise to Moses:

The LORD⁴³⁴ replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.."

Prayer is a refuge in God's presence from whatever troubles us. David witnessed,

How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues;⁴³⁵

Let us pray....

⁴³² Steve Lopez from Chestnut Assembly Church in Vineland NJ.

⁴³³ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/sermons/1469.cfm?a=1107006

⁴³⁴ Exodus 33:14.

⁴³⁵ Psalms 31:19-20.

The Rest of the Story

There were a few events that lead up to my abandonment on a country road in Pennsylvania. It isn't directly linked to my prayer life. But we could say it was indirectly connected, since God can be expected to map out a straight course ahead for those who believe in Him. He is glorified in our obedience and this starts with prayer. I never asked God to make Bible school happen, yet, I should not be surprised when God leads me there.

Perhaps I resurrect these memories to remind myself how God has been directing the early events of my life. Remembering those times when God clearly had a hand in the circumstances of my life encourages my faith.

I had no intention of going to any Bible school when I left high school even though my interest in God's Word was undeniable. I even attempted—unsuccessfully—to learn some Greek words in which the New Testament was originally written. But I was no planner and had not applied at any Bible college. Instead I enrolled at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The University was previously a college seeking accreditation as a University which meant the curricula were undergoing some changes.

I majored in Chemistry and minored in Math and, to shorten this story, with the counselor's advice, I enrolled in Physics 105 but should have, as a Chemistry major, enrolled in Physics 101. The professor in this class was brought in from an industrial lab environment. He was no teacher. It was as if circumstances conspired to throw me out of the university. At the end of my second year there, my GPA was less than 1 and they wrote me a letter

advising I do not try college level courses. I was not a good candidate for higher learning.

I recall on one bus ride home (I commuted) I sat next to a high school classmate who questioned me about going into the ministry. He thought I was going to attend some Bible college and not a secular university. We were in high school in some classes together but never close friends and I do not remember saying anything to anyone in high school about my “going into the ministry.”

That summer, 1965, I didn’t think much about it but I knew I had to do something with the rest of my life; so, I spoke briefly with my Sunday School teacher. We used to have one hour of Bible lessons before church. Mr. Wilson, my instructor, cautioned me not to do what he did. He became a chemist when he thought he should have been a minister of the Bible. So I went to the pastor with my concerns.

Usually pastors will give some canned advice and promise to pray about it—nothing more, but Reverend Skymer moved into action. It was July already. He instructed me to apply at NBI (Northeast Bible Institute) in eastern Pennsylvania as step one. I did and the next thing I know I was accepted and his wife and her friend were driving me away from my life in the city.

It seemed like circumstances at the university were against my staying in Buffalo. It was as if God arranged to have me pushed out. Granted, this didn’t take much divine effort since a twenty year old is easily disillusioned when he is saddled with electives such as economics and anthropology and, oh yes, physics 105. My first love was the Bible and these courses seemed more like chains than wings for this little bird who wanted to, in the words of

David, "*fly away and be at rest.*"⁴³⁶

The university was in the process of adding teachers to their staff who were not teachers by profession and giving me a counselor who later denied he misdirected me. That's all it took. A few C's from a few other courses and my first college experience was over.

My classmate, Richard, on the city bus was probably speaking for God or God used him to hint at the next move God wanted for me. And church leaders usually ignore such concerns. There are no church programs or financial advisors to arrange the details for a high school graduate to enter college, but the pastor planned my attending bible college down to the ride there. And there I was at the end of that country road wondering: what just happened!?

And now you know the rest of the story.

⁴³⁶ Psalms 55:6.

So Much Sorrow

Why is there so much sorrow in the world?

This question has found its way to the center of the argument against a belief in the existence of a God of love and mercy. If God loved His creation, could He condone so much suffering? But God not only condones it, He participates in it according to some christian teaching.

Professor Bart Erhman, who is a textual critic of bible scholarship fame, speaks for many why the Christian faith no longer fascinates them:

I left the faith for what I took to be (and still take to be) an unrelated reason: the problem of suffering in the world.⁴³⁷

Whether suffering was the last straw or the sole reason for the professor's deconversion, I do not know. But he raises an interesting point of which much has already been written. If God were real and a God of love, why *any* suffering!? This is a favorite bullet point for non-believers in debating the existence of God. And it tipped the scales for more educated and smart people than just the professor for whom science now outweighs faith in importance. They would rather rely upon their own wit in a dilemma than to talk to a God they no longer believe is there for them. They would rather depend on themselves for the solutions to their problems than to trust in a God of Love to guide them.

Worldviews

This is where worldviews enter the discussion. Christians

⁴³⁷ Bart Ehrman. *Jesus Interrupted* (New York:Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 277.

have made room in their worldview for suffering claiming it was the result of sin and it can serve God as a discipline to bring us all closer to Him. The professor's worldview is more scientific depending on our own discovery and inventiveness to improve life. Some are evolutionaries who believe in a sort of survival of the fittest that will eventually bring mankind into a utopia free from poverty and all forms of suffering. Either way, science or evolution, suffering has no adequate explanation other than as a weakness that needs eradicating.

Prayer View

But is it possible that no one of these views by itself is adequate to explain suffering? Is it possible that one view overlaps another?

For a christian believer who is in constant communication with God, The Lord's love is very much a part of the explanation of all things—especially, their suffering—as something that brings them nearer God? But it is equally true for the person with no prayer life that they are on their own in this life; so, the other worldviews make more sense to them!?

Is it possible also for those who do not pray and have no contact with God that they are left to navigate the rapids as best they can and if they flounder in the waves, best they know how to swim because, for them, there is no God to rescue. Call it fate, but there is a sense in which for the non-believer—No! For the person who has no communication line open with God; for the person who does not have a prayer life—suffering is an earthly experience with no higher purpose. Life, for the person

not used to going to God for help, is a coin toss and now and again they lose. Understandably for these persons, suffering serves no lofty goal. Evolution wants to filter it out.

For the non-believer, the Apostle Paul talking about a creation that is groaning sounds like so much nonsense. But it makes infinite sense to a believer who sees our sinfulness as a cause for much suffering in nature.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.⁴³⁸

A Distinction

The distinction, therefore, between those who have an acceptance of suffering in this life while they await a suffering free life to come and those who accuse our Creator of mismanaging His resources by allowing suffering to exist, is one of *prayer*. Talking to God makes that big a difference in our view of life. Praying—not only a good theological explanation—helps us gain a more tolerable perspective on suffering. Talking things over with God can help us to be more accepting of the less desirable experiences of life.

When the Apostle Paul was pursued by his opposition (this is the greek word for *persecute*, namely, *to hunt down*), he told one church, “*I am exceeding joyful*”⁴³⁹ When James, Jesus’ brother, felt the hunter’s arrow whiz by he happily accepted it as something he must endure, a small price for following His Savior. He explained:

Consider it pure joy⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ Romans 8:22.

⁴³⁹ 2 Corinthians 7:4.

⁴⁴⁰ James 1:2.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.⁴⁴¹

Some of the church's most inspiring hymns were born out of much sorrow.

And what should we say about illness and sickness? The Apostle John said it best:

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health.⁴⁴²

The value of suffering is only realized by those who have first discovered the value of prayer.

⁴⁴¹ James 1:12.

⁴⁴² 3 John 1:2.

The Tradition of Ezekiel: Holiness

One of the most emphatic references to the importance of God's Holiness is in the tradition of Ezekiel. The young prophet's understanding of God's motive in exiling His people in captivity, allowing His temple to be destroyed, and inevitably bringing Israel again back into their homeland is rooted not alone in a spirit of love or compassion for Israel but also in a personal interest in His own holiness and, in that connection, with His name and His glory.

The prophet is allowed to see the Glory of God departing the temple and then the city and then the nation as a visible revelation of God leaving. ⁴⁴³[Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:23]

The honor of His name, also, since Moses' day has been a sensitive issue with God for reasons any believer should intuitively know if they are concerned about witnessing to their world. [Exodus 20:7; Numbers 20:12] It is important to note that whether we are talking about God's Name or His Glory or His Holiness, they are the same!

Professor Brueggmann⁴⁴⁴ correctly noted that it is a nuance peculiar to the tradition of Ezekiel that the rescue of Israel, then, is more "*a strategy for manifesting YHWH's*⁴⁴⁵ *holiness than His compassion.*" (Brueggmann, 231)

* * *

⁴⁴³ ICHABOD, Hebrew: no glory, or where is the glory?

⁴⁴⁴ cp Walter Brueggmann & Tod Linafelt *An Introduction to the Old Testament. The Canon and Christian Imagination.* Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville KY. 2nd Ed. 2021. pp 231-232

⁴⁴⁵ Walter Brueggmann uses the sacred divine name YHWH, Jahwah or Jehovah, which in this context is most appropriate.

Holiness

God's holiness is inseparably tied to, and a synonym of, His nature, who He is [Exodus 3:14]:

"(holiness) *indeed, ...contains the innermost description of God's nature.*"⁴⁴⁶

Theologically, it gets easier to understand if we say that whoever God is, His Holiness, in relation to His creation, is personified or revealed in His name and manifested in His glory. According to Ezekiel, God's reason[s] behind restoring Israel from captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah—and us from sin at Calvary—denies a simple one-dimensional explanation. Professor Brueggmann observed in Ezekiel's perspective that God's reason for "newness," or restoration, is God's *Holiness*. He returned Israel from their captivity for His Name's sake, not merely because He loved them:

In some other traditions, especially Hosea and Jeremiah, such newness from YHWH is rooted in YHWH's compassion for Israel but not here! Here the newness is "not for your sake," that is, not because YHWH loves Israel.⁴⁴⁷

[Not to say God doesn't love Israel; He does!]

Rather, in this tradition, YHWH is preoccupied with YHWH's own self and in YHWH's reputation among the nations. Thus YHWH's actions are designed only to enhance YHWH and, if we may say so, to appeal to YHWH's vanity.⁴⁴⁸

Respectfully, "vanity" to me is not the right word. God is simply expressing Himself; being the God that He is, who He wanted to be to Israel, and whom He wanted Israel to sanctify among the nations.

* * *

⁴⁴⁶ Gerhard Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1974). vol I. p 100.

⁴⁴⁷ Brueggmann, 232

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid.*

Nuance

Nuance is everything and when trying to get to the reasons God does what God does may prove theologically challenging. Dr. Brueggmann's documentation tries but I caution using human reason to explain the Divine. I agree that God's reputation is at risk (His witness in us in a New Testament sense) but was His primary concern appearing weak among the nations (as Dr. Brueggmann implies) because He seemed to fail at delivering the very people He choose to love!? Note the word "powerful":

The ultimate motive of YHWH's activity is found in his desire to vindicate his "name," the primary content of which is, it seems, not his reputation as a compassionate, forgiving or even a just God, but rather in his reputation as a powerful deity.⁴⁴⁹ [emphasis added]

To me it is sufficient to say that God's holiness speaks to His character, which in terms of His revelation to us speaks to His reputation, but reasoning that His primary interest is in showing Himself always and only as "powerful" fails to encompass the totality, the fulness, of the divine mind in the matter. Continuing the quote,

It would not be inaccurate to say that in Ezekiel YHWH does indeed in a sense act out of "divine self interest."⁴⁵⁰

So God rescues, Israel from captivity and you and I from sin, but Dr. Brueggmann calls this a *by-product* of His desire to vindicate Himself. [1 Timothy 3:16]. Is it!? The professor may have inadvertently or unintentionally implied that God's interests were only personal and not for our benefit.

Did we simply get in the way of His grace? This makes no sense, but cautioning our world that God's Glory will not always hang around disrespected and unnoticed is a

⁴⁴⁹ *ibid.* (Joyce 1989, 103).

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*

warning worth noting. Dishonoring God's Name, which is a revelation of who He is, is something God will inevitably address in judgment. Being holy for He is holy is not just a request but a requirement for a relationship with Him.

Holiness or Compassion

So is His holiness more important than His compassion? Is His love a by-product of a divine self-interest? [Ezekiel 39:26-29] Is His holiness His primary concern? Walter Brueggemann again:

The rescue of Israel is a happy by-product of YHWH's self-vindication, but nonetheless only a by-product. [emphasis added] This nuance of motivation is important, because it exhibits in the Ezekiel tradition a very different Yahwistic grounding for Israel's future, A hope rooted not in love but in holiness.⁴⁵¹

“...rooted not in love but *only* in holiness“??

Is not God's love an aspect or attribute of His holiness?
Of course!

So, how about both!

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out ⁴⁵²into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁵² Romans 5:5

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