

FOUNT OF
HEAVEN

PRAYERS
of the
EARLY CHURCH



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|
Robert Elmer, Editor



Fount of Heaven: Prayers of the Early Church

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INTRODUCTION

Scripture tells us in Luke 11:1 that the original twelve disciples asked Jesus how to pray. It was a good question then, and one worth asking again today.

To help answer that question, this collection of prayers seeks to open a window into the souls of the first generations of believers—real people whose hearts beat with praise in the face of trouble and persecution. As we share in their prayers, we discover new depth for our own. So let's consider for a moment the world in which these early believers found themselves.

The turbulent centuries immediately following Christ's earthly ministry might seem an unlikely time for new faith to flourish. But it did. Despite the danger of persecution and death, people of the Way spread out across the Roman world and eagerly shared what they believed. Home churches and prayer meetings flourished even as the mighty empire crumbled. And by the early 300s, Christians could be found virtually everywhere around the Mediterranean—from Syria to Greece, Italy to North Africa and Egypt, Turkey and beyond.

It was as if a nuclear bomb of faith had detonated, with Jerusalem as its epicenter. In wave after wave, Christian communities grew to include men and women from all levels of society, slave and aristocrat alike.

As the church grew, its worship services, sermons, instructions, and prayers found their way into writing,

carefully recorded by people with names like Clement and Polycarp, Ambrose and Augustine. Many of these early Christian leaders had turned from wealth and status to embrace the new faith.

It would be a costly choice in more ways than one. During periods of persecution, some paid with their lives when they refused to take the easy path of accommodation and survival by bowing before the altars of Roman emperor worship. Still, they prayed together with an awe and reverence that recognized God's power, preeminence, and holiness. They wrote about their faith with an effusive, mystery-filled joy that is rare today.

As these early Christians waded through deep waters, personal issues seemed to take a back seat to the all-consuming glory of their three-in-one God. Their outward-focused prayers are typically all about "thee," not "me." They seemed to have little time for the luxury of self-centered drama.

So what could have motivated those people to cling so stubbornly to a highly dangerous faith? And what would they have wanted us to know? The answers to such questions, if taken seriously, could have a profound effect on our faith today.

We find in the words of their prayers that their understanding of God mattered a great deal. These believers wrestled with theology, argued theology, wrote mountains of books (by hand!) about theology, and held conferences about theology.

In other words, truth mattered. Doctrine mattered. Details and shades of meaning—it all mattered. And in their search

for truth, eventually those Christians hammered and molded what they believed into creeds that are still recited today by their spiritual heirs.

Our world still desperately needs the truth for which those believers lived and died because the serpent still whispers, “Did God really say...?” In response, Irenaeus of Lyons once prayed about his own writing for God to “help every reader of this book to know you, that you are God alone, and to be strengthened in you, and to avoid every heretical, godless, and irreverent doctrine.”¹

Heretical, godless, and irreverent? By current standards, these terms seem prickly and intolerant. Yet they stand as useful markers to help us navigate past the deadly shoals of shallow belief and unexamined faith.

We face many of the same challenges as the early Christians—among them, the unending challenge to maintain a more vibrant and consistent prayer life. As the noted theologian and church leader Jerome wrote in the early fifth century,

I stand to pray; I could not pray, if I did not believe; but if I really believed, I should cleanse that heart of mine with which God is seen, I should beat my hands upon my breast, the tears would stream down my cheeks, my body would shudder, my face grow pale, I should lie at my Lord's feet, weep over them, and wipe them with my hair, I should cling to the cross and not let go my hold until I obtained mercy. But, as it is, frequently in my prayers I am either walking in the arcades, or calculating my interest, or am carried away with base thoughts, so as to be occupied with things the mere mention of which

makes me blush. Where is our faith? Are we to suppose that it was thus that Jonah prayed? Or the three youths? Or Daniel in the lion's den? Or the robber on the cross?²

Jerome recognized his own weaknesses, and perhaps they mirror our own. Yet he and his contemporaries also had the long game in mind—their impact on future generations. This collection seeks to build a bridge between those early prayers and us, spanning the centuries to enrich and inspire renewed daily prayer.

This bridge brings us into closer contact with the hearts and pens of Christ-followers who enjoyed precious few degrees of separation from events recorded in the Gospels. Several of the earliest writers may even have had direct contact with an original apostle (John or Peter, for example).

Not every writer was a professional theologian, priest, or church leader, however. A few, like Ausonius, were simply early believers who happened to leave behind a personal account that survived the centuries. Typically, the writings were then translated from the original Latin, Greek, or Syriac sometime in the nineteenth century. I've edited and abridged the antiquated English wording for clarity, updating the text for today's reader. In some cases, early sermons have been modified through light edits. In others, early prayers flowed organically from the middle of a homily or apologetic message.

Note also that the authorship of individual writings may occasionally be disputed or in question—but that is to be expected for writings of this vintage. To be clear, the purpose of this book is not to authenticate or disprove

scholarly claims that have seesawed between divergent conclusions over the years. That is beyond our scope. For example, did Clement of Rome actually pen all the prayers ascribed to him in the *Apostolic Constitutions*? Scholars may disagree. Or who wrote the *Didache*? We're not sure.

Yet I am convinced the original authors would have been pleased to have us borrow their words for our own prayers. After all, these are not just a window into the distant past, but a reminder of First Things. In these prayers are recorded *what really matters*. And if it were possible, we would thank our earliest brothers and sisters for the way they held firmly to faith, and to our Savior, even on the worst of days.

Perhaps we can know a measure of this same dedication as we pray once more the prayers they prayed.

—Robert Elmer

LIST OF AUTHORS

ADÆUS AND MARIS (c. 200)

AMBROSE OF MILAN (340–397)

ANATOLIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE (died 458)

APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS (c. 380)

ARNOBIUS (died 330)

ATHENOGENES (died 305)

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430)

AUSONIUS (310–395)

BASIL OF CAESAREA (330–379)

JOHN CASSIAN (360–430)

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (345–407)

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (150–215)

CLEMENT OF ROME (35–101)

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (315–386)

THE DIDACHE (first century)

EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN (306–373)

EUSEBIUS (260–340)

GREGORY NAZIANZEN (325–389)

GREGORY OF NYSSA (335–395)

HILARY OF POITIERS (300–367)

IRENÆUS OF LYONS (130–200)

LACTANTIUS (230–325)

MELITO OF SARDIS (died 180)

METHODIUS OF OLYMPIA (died 311)

ODES OF SOLOMON (c. 125)

PAULINUS PELLÆUS (377–461)

POLYCARP (69–155)

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SERAPION SCHOLASTICUS (died 370)

SHAMUNA THE MARTYR (died 293)

SYNESIUS (375–413)

TERTULLIAN (155–220)

THEODORET (393–458)

VENANTIUS (530–609)



THE PRAYERS



HELP US TO PRAISE

WHOEVER SEEKS WILL PRAISE

Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised.

Great is your power. Your wisdom is infinite, and we praise you.

We, who are just a particle of your creation. We, who carry our mortality with us—the witness of our sin, and the witness that you resist the proud.

Yet we praise you.

You awaken us to delight in your praise. For you made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its place of rest in you.

Grant me, Lord, to know and understand which is first: to call on you, or to praise you? To know you, or to call on you? For who can call on you, not knowing you? Whoever does not know you might call on you as someone other than you really are.

Or rather, do we call on you so that we may know you? But how do they call on him in whom they have not believed? Or how will they believe without a preacher? (Romans 10:14).

And whoever seeks the Lord will praise him: for they that seek will find him, and they that find will praise him.

I will seek you, Lord, by calling on you. And I will call on you, believing in you, because you have been preached to us.

With the faith you have given me, I will call on you. That faith has inspired me, through the incarnation of your Son, through the ministry of the preacher.

Amen.

— *Augustine of Hippo*

WE SET OUR HOPE ON YOUR NAME

Help us to set our hope on your name, Lord. You are the origin and source of all creation. You open the eyes of our hearts so we can know you.

You alone abide highest in the lofty place. You are holy in the holy. You lay low the insolence of the proud, set the lowly on high, and bring down the lofty. You make rich and poor, give life and death. You alone are the benefactor of spirits and the God of all flesh.

You look into the deepest places and see all our works. You help and relieve those who are in peril, and you are the savior of those in despair. You are the creator and overseer of every spirit.

You multiply the nations and have chosen out all who love you through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom you taught us, honored us, and set us apart.

Amen.

— *Clement of Rome*

*This prayer is widely regarded as the earliest recorded
Christian prayer outside of Scripture.*

WE PRAY TO STIR UP DEVOTION

Lord, since eternity is yours, do you not know of what I speak to you? Or do you see in time, what passes in time? Why then do I so often speak to you in time?

Truly I do not pray so you will learn from me, but to stir up my devotion toward you. We pray so that we all may say, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.”

I have said it already, and will say it again: I do this for the love of your love.

For we pray also, and yet Truth (that is, Jesus himself) has said, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8).

So it is our affections that we lay open to you, confessing our own miseries, and your mercies on us.

Through prayer, you may free us wholly. Through prayer, we may cease to be miserable in ourselves, and blessed in you.

Through prayer, we see how you have called us to become poor in spirit, and meek, and mourners, hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Through prayer, we learn to become merciful, and pure in heart, and peacemakers.

See, I have told you many things, as I could and as I would, because you first wanted me to confess unto you, my Lord God. For you are good, and your mercy endures forever, amen.

— *Augustine of Hippo*



PRAISE YOU FOR YOUR
ATTRIBUTES