

CHAPTER ONE

≡ *What Is the Point?* ≡

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Not why do you exist, but why are you here, in this moment, with this book in your hands? This first chapter isn't about answers, it's about questions. Why do we want to learn more about prayer?

For some of us, there's little to ask. Prayer is an occasional rote act, a tip of the hat to a divine power, a rabbit's-foot at bedtime, an acknowledgment of tradition at the dinner table. We rattle off comfortable phrases absorbed long ago from the mouths of others. In church services, it's a transitional trick to move us from one form of worship to another. At funerals, it's a means to offer comfort. At weddings, a come-to-order. We are often so familiar with certain turns of speech that we unconsciously open our eyes and lift our heads when someone veers too far from the rutted tracks we anticipate.

Others of us are quite at ease with spontaneous prayer. When we encounter disaster or grief or terrors, our first instinct is to stop, seize whatever hand is closest, and drop immediately into petition. Some people find this unexpectedly comforting and reassuring. Others are suspicious, taken aback, startled off-guard. They wonder if this is a show we are putting on, where our sense of decorum is, and hastily rattle off Jesus' admonition to pray in closets as a prop to their embarrassment.

Some of us live in a constant running monologue directed at God, an unspoken pattering of mostly thoughtless conversation picked up every few minutes throughout the day. We trust God implicitly with our parking spot dilemmas, the magical opening of a third cash register, our completely unnecessary drive on icy roads, and getting all green lights when we leave late for work. We take pride in our reliance on God for everyday living but have lost all sense of respect or awe in our approach, often muttering pleas while shimmying out of our clothes or standing in the shower or sitting on the toilet. We send up hasty intercessions between memes and GoFundMe notifications on our phones. And when we're faced with something legitimately,

entirely, out of our hands, something that requires our complete and unqualified reliance on God, we are at a loss as to how to pray with deliberation. To drop to our knees, shut out the world for an hour or more, and pray aloud, with a single, unbroken intention is an impossibility.

I say we, because I have been all of these people, and I imagine many of you have been as well. Prayer can be a touchy subject, because aren't all Christians supposed to know exactly how to pray already? It's tempting to smile and nod when people say "rich prayer life" as if we know what in the world that is supposed to mean. No-one wants to step up and say, *I don't know how to do this*, or *I don't feel like anyone is listening*, or *why doesn't this work*? No-one wants to admit they feel awkward about prayer or have doubts about what it can accomplish. We all express gratitude when someone tells us they're praying for us, and then we wonder, but are you really? And what does that sound like? And why isn't it working?

Why isn't it working?

Perhaps this is the real reason you are reading this book. I imagine every believer has grappled with this question. When we come to God disconsolate and desperate, pouring out our hearts in urgent petition, and find ourselves refused, the grief and confusion is staggering. Did I not have enough faith? Am I doing this wrong? Does God not care? Is everything predetermined so that prayer has no practical effect at all anyway? Is God a being who demands constant acknowledgment and praise but has nothing to say in return?

These are hard questions. And while the chapters ahead will endeavor to answer these, there are some questions you must first answer for yourself.

Why do you want to understand prayer? Is your search outcome-focused or relationship-focused? What do you want to get from God that you hope prayer can supply?

It will also be important to examine what your prayer habits are now, before we move forward with this study. When do you pray, and how do you pray? What sort of prayers are most common for you—intercession for others, requests for self, praise, thanksgiving,

repentance, or the laundry list prayer which clumps everything together at once. Or perhaps you rely on the hand-wave prayer: *to God who knows everything before we ask, please grant our petitions and forgive whatever transgressions we have committed.* I've often heard this one led even by elders and preachers at church gatherings. A prayer asking God to do incredible, unimaginably powerful things that we can't even be troubled to list, because, you know, the sermon is going to take too long already.

We call ourselves the family of God, but we're usually much closer to being the PTA or Homeowner's Association of God. We're in pretty close quarters and we share a common goal, but we always clear out the dirty laundry and put out the good china before inviting each other in. We struggle with transparency and weakness and doubts and flaws. We all want to look like we get it, we understand, we have it together. But true families know exactly who never makes their bed, who is scared of spiders, who eats Pop Tarts for dinner. And the beauty of God wanting to set us in families like a wounded sheep in the midst of a flock (Psalm 107:41) is that our family does know exactly what our weaknesses are. Knowing our weaknesses, they will strengthen us if they can and shield us if they cannot. This only works if we are willing to be honest and unfiltered and defenseless with each other.

So, if you're reading this book as part of a study group or Bible class, spend some time discussing these questions with each other. Talk about what your prayer life looks like now, what you think it accomplishes, what you want it to look like. What baffles or grieves you. What you're afraid of.

And if you're reading it alone, reach out to a fellow believer. A friend, a spouse, a coworker who bows her head with you at lunch. Tell them what you're reading and what you're wondering. Find out where they are in their journey. All these navigational points will help you find your own location on the path so you can make it safely through the woods.

CHAPTER TWO
=*Entrust to Truth*=

AUGUSTINE FAMOUSLY SAID in Confession Eleven of Book IV, “Entrust to Truth whatever you have from Truth, and you will lose nothing.” Perhaps this is a poor but concise summary of God’s litany of questions directed at Job at the close of that book. All that is real, all that is beautiful, and all that is good, proceeds from truth.

In Job chapters 38—41, God calls on Job to gather himself and answer. This exchange is noteworthy for many reasons. Few instances are given of God engaging in literal dialogue with people. Here, God speaks directly and personally to Job. He completely disregards the foolish friends who had condemned Job as the cause of his own downfall (and Elihu) aside from telling Job that they speak from ignorance and implying that he does not know them.

God’s arrival on the scene corrects the misapprehensions of both Job and his friends and signals the restoration of Job’s prosperity, health, and joy, but he does not comfort Job with soft speech or reassurances. He never explains to Job the catalyst of his misfortunes. He does not justify his own apparent absence. Yet from Job’s response in 42:1-6, it is clear that Job *is* comforted and reassured.

What are we missing? For many of us, the book of Job is itself a challenge of faith. Knowing the drama that unfolded in the heavenly court prior to Job’s suffering makes it almost more troubling, not less so, that God permitted this devastation to unfold. And God’s eventual conversation with Job may feel cold, unfeeling, even hostile, as God unfurls all his power and mystery and glory in the face of Job’s helplessness and agony. It’s uncomfortable to admit this. What sort of God can look at a man whose children are dead, who is literally in the dirt in poverty and sickness, and speak of oceans and stars and eagles and fish?

Truth can speak this way. And Job, who had entrusted all that he loved to Truth, heard it and was comforted.

In the first chapter of the book, we learn that Job offered his children up to God in prayer and sacrifice continually. We know from God’s

description of Job that his trust and reliance in God in all things was complete. When Job realizes his entire life has been stolen away from him, his children and his servants dead, his livelihood destroyed, he states his willingness to return to God as he came into the world—utterly naked.

What to our ears, to our hearts that are perhaps weaker in faith than Job, sounds like a brutally chilling indictment of man's ignorance before God, actually was reassurance to Job. Every question God asks, Job knows the answer. The answer is God. The answer is Truth. The God to whom Job has entrusted his children and his life and his soul was every bit as powerful and creative and beautiful and unknowable as Job had believed. His faith had not been misplaced. Everything real that Job had given over to that God was still safe. Although the corporeal reality around Job seemed to prove the uselessness of his prayers, God was promising him that he was more than mighty enough to keep what Job had committed into his hands.

Are our prayers powerless? Perhaps we are praying to a powerless God, one we have unwittingly plastered together ourselves out of wishes and hopes and misconceptions, self-righteousness and justification, wood and stone. It is easy to build a God we can define, whose laws and motivations we can list in neat bullet points. But this sort of God requires a lot of direction. So we pray to him with painful exactitude.

Dear Father, Please help me get this new job, but I need the night shift so I can get the kids to school, and let them wait to call me till I've had a chance to take my vacation time.

Dear Father, Please heal my sister from her cancer before she finds out her husband is cheating on her because I only have one spare bedroom and she has three kids.

Dear Father, Please bring rain to put out the wildfire but don't let the rivers flood.

Dear Father, Please help the good people [people I love] and defeat the bad people [people I don't love] and don't ask me to sacrifice too much to make that happen.

We worry God might not really understand all the possible outcomes of his rash actions on our behalf, so we try to fence our requests as precisely as possible along the property lines we are willing to own. Other times our trouble is the opposite: we worry that Paul wasn't exaggerating at all when he wrote to the Ephesians that God is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think" (3:20). We are more comfortable with a leashed deity, one whose intentions we can anticipate and whose power will be delicately applied only as much as we wish and no more. We may not want a fierce and wild and unpredictable Being expending his will and power on our behalf.

As a meditation technique, then, prayer may be useful enough in helping us identify who we are and what we want, but until we are willing to trust Truth with ourselves and all that we love, our voices will never do more than echo back at us from the walls of our own houses. We must be willing to believe in Him whom we cannot know, we must trust what we cannot comprehend, we must surrender without caveat everything we would hold most tightly.

Are there people or things or ideas in our lives that we love too little to give to God? It doesn't feel that way. It feels like we love them too much. We are afraid to let them get out of our reach. Afraid to watch them disappear down a path that isn't yet ours to follow, that may never be. But it's like the mother caught in the burning building with her child in her arms. All her instinct screams at her to hold fast, to never let that child go. But the only way to save the child is to let them go, to trust that the arms of the firefighter are strong enough and big enough to carry the child to safety.

We must make careful inventory of our treasures and then relinquish them entirely. All that we cling to becomes ash in the end.

CHAPTER THREE

==Teach Me Thy Ways==

OFTEN WE APPROACH GOD with the intention of bending him to our will. This isn't something we acknowledge, of course, or perhaps even recognize in ourselves, but a cursory examination of our requests soon makes this plain. To pray, to fast, is not to send a letter or shoot off an e-mail or instant message to the divine. To pray is to step into the court of God, to dwell with him in a space marked as our own by the blood of his Son. It is a communion of our soul with his.

Faith is the door through which we enter this place. We come into his presence not to make demands but to listen to his voice, to dwell in his love, to bring into ourselves the consummation of his will.

People recount the tale of the thief on the cross for many reasons, but seldom do we consider the request he made of Christ. "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). After hours of unspeakable anguish, the thief has clearly recognized the divine nature of his fellow sufferer, the totality of his power. What is amazing is what he does not ask. He does not ask Jesus to spare his life. He does not ask Jesus to end his suffering. He asks Jesus to remember him. Somehow, in what ought to have been a moment of abject despair, the thief enters the presence of God and apprehends his will. For this, Jesus assures him of their unbroken walk together—not just that the thief would enter paradise, but that he would be there with Jesus himself.

In her book *Holy The Firm*, Annie Dillard says, "Teach me Thy ways, O Lord, is like all prayers a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend." True prayer is indeed a dangerous, reckless act subversive to the powers that be in this world. To enter into a dialogue with the Creator, to submit our own intentions entirely to his, transforms not only ourselves but necessarily the world itself. We cannot serve God without serving our fellow man, and we cannot serve our fellow man without revolutionizing our society.

The passage to which Annie Dillard refers is Psalm 86. The psalmist recounts the mercy and love and longsuffering of God, his grace and truth and power, his outstretched arm, and relays his desire to walk

that same path. *Unite my heart*, he pleads. What a beautiful concept, for our hearts to be whole and undivided in their devotion to the divine nature.

When we, like the thief, are consumed by physical pain or absolute heartbreak, do we ask God to remove our agony? Or do we ask him to remember us, to carry us with him?

It is not wrong to ask God to deliver us from our troubles. The scriptures are full of examples of these requests and in many cases, of God's subsequent salvation. Jesus himself not only instructs us to ask our Father for all we require but welcomes us to ask him again and again. James, Jesus' earthly brother, urges us in 1:6 to ask in faith, doubting nothing. Our God is not heedless of our petitions: to the contrary, he can and will answer us with power.

Faith, however, is no small thing. We must not only have faith that he will answer us, we must have faith in who he is. Knowing him for who he is and not who we want him to be, we must comprehend all that is terrifying and all-consuming and other and still approach him fearlessly, made perfect in love. We must ask for everything we need and desire at the same moment we surrender every longing to his will. We must remake our own selfishnesses into servanthood.

“God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (I John 4:16–18).

What survives the flame but fire itself? If we are to stand in God's presence and not be destroyed, we must partake of that same searing glory. By accepting God's nature fully into our own and allowing it to transform us, we are able to walk into the blaze without fear, complete in love.

Christianity is a devotion of mysteries. Jesus told his disciples that the only way to truly be children of the Father was to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44–45). The admonition to prayer is not one of lip-service. Here Jesus

acknowledges the transformative nature of the sincere prayer. It is not possible to pray for our enemies without being ourselves changed, altered, glorified. Prayer is not the empty, rote mouthing of appropriate words and phrases: it is powerful and metamorphic and immediate.

To live in faith, then, is to live in love.

The more interior and sacrificial our conversations with God, the more devoted we will become to serving those around us. It is impossible to ask God to deliver others from suffering unless we are willing to be the instrument he uses for that deliverance. When we are fully spent in our love for others, we are fearlessly able to commit into God's hands all that we are unable to accomplish and be absolutely assured of his work on our behalf. We can ask for the miraculous, nothing doubting, because of the miracle he has accomplished in us already: the unbroken union of our imperfect selves with his perfect will.

So here we stand, staring at the door of faith which will open to us the chamber of our God, our Father, our Brother, our Paraclete. Within that room is all love, all hope, all power. But we must shed our secret selves before we enter. All the pieces of ourselves that we keep back from God, our willful desires, our hatreds, our prejudices, the meanness we allow ourselves, the justifications and excuses, must die here before we walk through.

Which of God's ways are we still afraid to learn? What sacrifice do we fear to make, what price is too high? Which of our enemies do we still beg leave to hate?