



Introduction

*T*eresa of Avila wrote:

Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us. The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love. Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything.

It is this thought of Teresa's, paired with a loving desire to teach a deep and lasting love of prayer to others, that is at the heart of this text. My whole life, in one sense, has been an experiment in how to be honest—before God and with myself—

in prayer. For honest prayer arises in an attitude of humility—a humility that opens the mind and heart, our whole being, to God. In humility I renounce my own power and acknowledge my poverty and dependence on God. I leave behind all the illusions about myself and am grounded in the truth of my life. It is in this truth that I learn to practice the presence of God in the midst of my daily life.

I created this collection of prayer practices for people who want to join me on a journey of discovery to look for ways to mature and move into a practice-centered life of prayer. I have drawn on the wealth of faith-based practices from Christian tradition, across centuries and communities, to present prayer practices and rituals that can speak to each of us, wherever we are in our journey of faith. As you explore these ways of praying, I hope you will find the integrity that helps you to be humble and honest in your prayer life.

Teresa's guidebook on prayer, *The Way of Perfection*, was written during a controversial time of reform in the saint's religious community, the Carmelite Order. Intended to serve as a guide in the practice of prayer, it sets forth directives for growing into the image of Christ through prayer. Like Teresa, my aim in writing this guidebook is to do justice to the needs of the present turbulent age within religious institutions and our culture.

Sage words from Teresa's prologue offer further guidance for me: "I shall speak of nothing of which I have no experience, either in my own life or in observation of others, or which the Lord has not taught me in prayer." Many wise men and women past and present have experienced God through prayer; we could spend a lifetime learning from them. In creating this book, I've consulted the teachings of both traditional and contemporary theologians, and in the workshops and prayer retreats I lead I've listened to the experience of people who faithfully practice prayer. I have drawn on their wisdom to supplement my own knowledge and experience.

Yet experience remains my best teacher. I try to be open to what my own prayerful encounters, along with common sense, have to teach me. In this book, I share practices and methods that have changed my life since I began to create an “inner room” for God. These writings contain some of the understandings that have come to light as I struggled to put prayer into practice, both in my own life and in my work with others who also seek a prayerful relationship with God.

I believe that an authentic Christian life is one that binds us to Christ and leads us each moment, through the power of God’s Spirit, as we continue to enter the daily struggle of accepting the gift and responsibility that the Holy Spirit gives. My end desire remains the same: that I draw closer to God and dwell in the Holy. I hold fast to the promise that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. I:6). This desire has in turn fed my intention in writing this book: to provide a resource of prayer practices for thinking believers that integrates heart and head, faith and reason, and holy living with active compassion. My prayer is that you will find ways of praying that make you attentive to the needs of the world around you, and that create a sacred space in which you move past your differences with others of faith, to find commonality and community.

We are in the midst of an awakening that underscores the breakdown of isolation among all the spiritual traditions. In fact, a recent study showed that 85 percent of those Americans who responded who identify with Christianity do not exclude from their lives wisdom and teachings from other great world religions. They understand that other faiths have something to share with us; their writings, teachings, and practices help us understand our own faith in a fresh way.

My hope is that Christians are healthily moving past the walls of prejudice to become part of a greater universal community, but without negating their own rich

faith tradition. We are gaining a deep, evolving experience of community between and among faiths and a growing receptivity to the inner treasures of the world's religions. Catholic Brother Wayne Teasdale, author of *The Mystic Heart*, explains that openness to other faiths does not mean that one submerges the differences; instead, this spirituality sees traditions in relationship to one another, opening the door to a broader truth.

My further hope, therefore, is that by encouraging exploration of prayers and practices used in different cultures throughout the two thousand years of Christian history, you will discover new ways to encounter the divine that deepen both your faith and your understanding of God.

I have attempted to create an easy-to-read, user-friendly handbook that you can apply on your own or in a group. *Paths to Prayer* leads you through step-by-step instructions for more than forty ways to pray. These gentle introductions to a variety of prayer styles encourage even the most hesitant of spirit to find ways of praying that are comfortable for them. This hands-on approach is intended for those who want to learn to pray, those who already pray but want to deepen their practice of prayer, and those who want to know how prayer “works.” Using illustration and instruction, the book balances intellectual knowledge of prayer along with heart-centered practices that can be applied to our lives and transform us.

Obviously, each practice in this book has had to be simplified, abridged, and shortened to make it manageable for a first-time introduction. One colleague, a Jesuit with an intimate knowledge of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, was amazed that I would try to reduce Ignatian prayer to such a short order, thereby leaving out important nuances. This is the reason I list so many other resources you can turn to for further instruction. This book is meant to whet your appetite, not serve the full course.

Before we set out on this journey together, I would like to clarify my approach to writing a book about prayer. First, no single book could hold all the ways of

praying, for there are as many ways to pray as there are souls who walk the earth. I don't have the definitive word on prayer, but my hope is that in the variety of prayers included in this book you may find some prayer practices that speak to you. Whether you choose to develop one practice or many, my end desire remains the same: that you grow closer to God and reside in the Holy.

Second, I have very little patience with prepackaged answers or categorizations that make prayer sound easy and manageable. Prayer is not something to be managed. Nor is it always easy. I'm skeptical of aggressive efforts by some religious individuals and groups who push shortcut methods to a comfortable prayer life and do not struggle with the whole person. I favor a slower, but sturdier and more humbling, development of one's prayer life that builds an all-embracing spiritual foundation for the sometimes-difficult soul searching that prayer requires.

I find little validity in romanticized prayer, idealized in sweetness and light, an approach that sees the rose while denying the thorn. It bypasses the reality of searching and the hard work of self-surrender that comes as we open our mind and heart—our whole being—to God. This is not a recipe book or an invitation to escape. Rather, it is an invitation to wrestle with the responsibility that prayer entails, both within our own souls and also in the world around us. Theologian Karl Barth is said to have observed that the Christian of today should have a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I agree. A life of prayer doesn't turn its back on the concerns of the world. Instead, it helps us discover the felt presence of God amid the nitty-gritty of everyday living.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is structured so that the practices of prayer can be taught in a variety of settings and circumstances. Along with some basics of prayer to get you started,

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I have included a prayer styles self-assessment, which invites you to reflect on your life, your beliefs, and your way of interacting with the world. Your responses on the self-assessment will guide you toward one of four styles of prayer—innovative, searching, relational, and experiential—that can serve as a comfortable starting point for the growth of your prayer life. Try a prayer, allow it to touch you, and then stop to reflect and absorb the prayer and mull it over for some time after experiencing it, before moving on to the next. Allow the experience to live and grow, just as your prayer life grows. You will discover that the experience of a particular prayer becomes more meaningful as you practice it on your own. You may find yourself jumping around in this book, scanning back to a previous chapter or exercise to reconsider a certain prayer with understanding and clarity you might have gleaned from a different practice altogether. Most of these practices can be used by an individual, but some do require a partner.

If you are more brave-hearted and have adventurous friends, gather a group to join you in this informal experiment. People who want to learn how to pray appreciate giving and receiving assistance from like-minded individuals. You'll find that there are lots of people who want to expand their spiritual life or learn how to pray.

Each practice begins with basic teachings and is laid out in an easy-to-follow manner for use by an individual or a group. If you are in a group, it is not necessary to have one appointed facilitator. Instead, the group members may want to rotate the responsibility. Through God's spirit, participants become teachers as well as the light of discovery for one another. Check beforehand to make sure you have any required props, such as beads for the rosary or a floor mat for the body prayer. Choose a space or room where you won't be interrupted. You might want to dim the lights, or burn a candle to give your space a more intimate atmosphere.

The first section common to most of the chapters, "Thoughts Before You Begin," helps you understand the history and background of a particular prayer

practice. Be careful not to spend so much time in preparing that you don't leave sufficient time for the most important element, the practice itself.

The "Now Begin" section gives the step-by-step instructions. Take a few moments to center or quiet yourself before taking the first step. Then allow ample time for the prayer practice itself. Don't rush the experience.

"Some Things to Think About" and "Questions for Reflection" help you debrief your experience. If you are in a group, remember to pause for a few minutes of silence and reflection before opening a group discussion. Thinking about your experience of a prayer following the prayer itself is extremely important. Reflecting on your experience and putting it into words helps you come to thoughtful conclusions about your spiritual growth and development. If you are working through this book alone, you might seek the guidance of a spiritual companion, director, or mentor. When we tell our stories in the context of our faith, we become more aware of how God is speaking to us. When we listen carefully with our hearts as well as our heads, God touches us in a greater way than we ever imagined possible.

If you are in a group, share your experience in ways that honor each person's uniqueness. Sometimes it may be appropriate for you to respond to others in your group verbally, but most often listening is the best response. As you allow one another to share freely and as you learn to refrain from responding when it is unnecessary or unhelpful, you may experience what it means to serve as the compassionate presence of Christ to one another. Warmth and mutual support are present, but they are not the focus. Instead, the focus is the working of the Holy Spirit helping each individual to grow in faithfulness.

"Other Resources to Continue Your Journey," in most of the chapters, lists additional books and resources for study and practice. Between meetings, members of the group may choose to continue to explore the same practice until the next meeting, when they can set aside a period of time to share insights and reflections together.

MY OWN PATH TO PRAYER

My most recent study of prayer has been as an academic theological discipline, and I frequently lead seminars and retreats for people who also seek to nurture their spiritual growth. But my experience of Jesus began long ago, with dim awareness of the stirring of the Spirit in my heart as a young girl in the mountains of Pennsylvania. I was raised in a Christian home and an orthodox “Bible believing” congregation. It is from their faithful example that I continue to participate in the Church, the body of Christ, and God’s mission.

As a young adult, I joined with the Evangelical United Brethren, who merged into the United Methodist Church, where I was ushered into the orthodox teachings and historic creeds of the Church. I continue to celebrate the gifts I received from my Wesleyan heritage, which gives me spiritual practices that have deepened my faith. In keeping with Wesley’s “catholic spirit,” I embrace the gifts Christians of past ages have conferred to us, which hold a vast storehouse of experience from which we can extract ways of being with God.



My prayer life took a drastic turn at the death of my young husband, Richard. I was twenty-five, with a three-year-old son. As Richard underwent a series of surgeries, and through the final one, I prayed consistently for his recovery. But as his condition worsened, my prayers changed too. After four weeks, I no longer demanded God’s cure, but rather God’s compassion. I saw my husband’s body for what it was: unable to sustain his life as God intended it. How did my prayer change? Richard was facing more surgical procedures, which would only prolong his suffering. His life had become a grueling struggle, each day worse than the last. What sort of lover would I be to make such a totally selfish request?

For Richard, my deepest desire was not that he live, but that he no longer suffer. In that moment, God's will and my desire became one. My prayer was answered with a yes. Death came six weeks after surgery. To some, this may seem like defeat after so much praying. But I believe his death was as much an answer to prayer as his recovery would have been. Now, my life of prayer is more open to the will of God than to my own limited human understanding.

Today, my "second" family and I are members of First United Methodist Church in downtown Orlando. Tonight, my husband, Dale, and I will join our Sunday school class, "The Parent's Forum," for our yearly Christmas dinner as our son Stephen goes to his weekly youth meeting at the *Skylight*. My son Christian, who was three when Richard died, now lives across the country and is always near to my heart and my thoughts. I have been richly blessed.

So, with roots deep and convictions strong, I offer a vision of prayer that is shaped by an ecumenical and interreligious sensibility and enriched by insights from psychology and related disciplines. Although I am well schooled in the variety of methods and approaches to prayer and the spiritual life, this work does not cling to any one of them. The concept of prayer presented here is at once broad and deep. What I share in this book has taken me a long time to experience and will take even longer to deepen into its purest promise. Therefore, I offer this book with humility and deference.