

Seeking God's Face

Praying with the Bible
through the Year

Written and compiled by Philip F. Reinders

Foreword by Eugene H. Peterson

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(compact version)

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FOREWORD



“Wendy, do you ever pray?”

She shook her head negatively. “No. Never.” Then a shy, self-deprecating smile played at the edges of her lips. “Sometimes I wish upwards.”

I didn’t know Wendy very well. I had married her and Jacob, a young man who was a member of my congregation, six months earlier. I met with them three or four times for conversations about marriage and their understanding and expectations of it. I remembered that Wendy was quite open about having no Christian commitment and only the sketchiest acquaintance with church. They were both immature. I asked them if and when they found difficulties in their relationship that they come back and talk with me.

Now she was back. I hadn’t seen her or Jacob since the day of the wedding. Things were not going well with their marriage; I wasn’t surprised. I suggested a marriage counselor that I trusted.

“Wendy, marriage is wonderful but complex, and being human is complex—a lot of things can go wrong. You and Jacob aren’t doing too well on your own. Dr. Shelly would be a good companion with you as you learn how to understand and give yourselves to one another. You probably ought to think in terms of several months.”

She wanted me to tell her what she could do on her own. She wasn’t interested in “several months.” I never saw her again.

But her sentence, “Sometimes I wish upwards,” stayed with me. It burrowed into my imagination and has lodged there ever since as a wonderful naming of what I began to think of as “pre-prayer”—a spontaneous response “upwards” out of the self-enclosed nature to meaning or fulfillment, or, who knows, God?

“Sometimes I wish upwards” is a nudge towards prayer, an opening crack of a door into mystery, a seed that if nurtured could soon

become prayer. I am convinced that everyone wishes upwards sometimes, maybe even often. The wish upwards is evidence, I've come to think, that everyone has the stuff within them, the capacity, even the longing, to be a person of prayer. But also, more often than not, nothing comes of it. The wish has no root in relationship, in language, in love, in God.

The life of prayer doesn't start from scratch. The wish upwards is evidence of a readiness to pray. But how do we get from wish to prayer? How do we get the elusive, wispy, insubstantial wish embodied into actual prayer?

This book, *Seeking God's Face*, is one way. The Christian community in every generation has written and published daily prayer books to accomplish this transition among men and women, followers of Jesus, who want their relation with God and their family and friends and neighbors to be something more than a wish upwards.

Daily prayer books take different forms and enter into different cultures and times, but most of them share certain essential characteristics that provide congenial conditions for developing a life of mature prayer, no longer praying by fits and starts, "clouds without rain . . . autumn trees, without fruit . . . wild waves of the sea . . . wandering stars . . ." (Jude 12-13).

Seeking God's Face melds prayer and Scripture into a companionable guide for becoming a participant—both listening and speaking—in the great salvation conversation that is the Christian gospel.

Prayer. Prayer is as natural and simple as language itself. The only difference between prayer and our mother tongue as we commonly use it is that in prayer God is a major voice. We all learn language without formal instruction. We are wondrously created with all the bodily parts in throat and mouth and ears that are necessary to speak and listen. A prayer book respects this basic and elementary at-home-ness, this aptitude that we all have for prayer. A prayer book is not a book about prayer, not an explanation of prayer, not a theological essay on prayer. It is prayers, usually brief, to be prayed.

Prayer is a natural and authentic substratum of language. But there is irony here: prayer, language at its most honest, is also the easiest form of language to fake. We discover early on that we can pretend to pray, use the words of prayer, practice the forms of prayer, assume postures of prayer, acquire a reputation for prayer, and never pray. Our “prayers,” so called, become a camouflage to cover up a life of nonprayer.

Set prayers are prayers provided for us to keep our praying in company with our ancestors, prayers of others so that we stay in touch with the authentic world of prayer revealed in our Scriptures. They are prayers that we can use to distinguish prayer from prayer impostors, fantasy, and magic. They are prayers that do not depend on our own initiative, prayers that don't wax and wane according to the phases of our moods.

In my home, a great deal of our common life is integrated into preparing meals, considering the tastes and circumstances of those who will be present, setting the table, eating the meal, cleaning up after the meal. No single meal is quite like another. They are many variables: the kinds of food that make up the meal, which members of the family will be there, guests that we anticipate. We enjoy the work. But occasionally we run out of energy and imagination. When that happens, we drive a few miles to a favorite restaurant in order to have someone else do it for us: shop for the food and prepare it, set the table, serve the meal, clear the table, and wash the dishes. A “set” meal: someone else whom we trust does it all for us. All we have to do is pick up the fork that has been set before us, eat the meal that has been set in place, and leave the cleanup to others.

When we are young children, all our meals are set meals, set before us without thought or preparation on our part. Gradually we learn to do it for ourselves and for others as we grow up. But it is still nice to have someone do the work for us when we are tired or without appetite. The analogy to prayer is not exact but it is close enough in this context.

The classic set prayers for Christians and Jews are the psalms. And the most prayed prayer in the church is a set prayer, the Lord's Prayer: “Pray then like this . . .”

Scripture. All prayer is language—language in conversation, conversation between God and us. The most frequent distortion of prayer takes place when we fail to listen to God’s Word to us. We do all the talking, demanding that God do all the listening.

Scripture provides the major way in which God speaks to us. Scripture is a huge story with many voices, but the primary voice is God’s voice. God has the first word. If we are going to get the story straight, it is important that we let God have the first word, and really listen; I mean *really* listen. Jesus’ story of the soils is a story about prayer: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

So if listening is required, silence is indispensable. Silence is a commonly overlooked element of language in general, but it must not be. Especially it must not be overlooked in the language of prayer. It is not as if the Old Testament prophets and poets and the New Testament apostles and Jesus—mainly Jesus, “the Word made flesh”—speak the revelation of God to us, and now in prayer we get to say our piece. Silence in prayer, which consists mostly in attentive listening, is nonnegotiable. Listening, which necessarily requires silence on our part, is as much a part of language as words. The colon and the semicolon, the comma and the period—all of which insist on silence as part and parcel of speech—are as essential to language as nouns and verbs. But more often than not, silence gets short shrift in our prayers. Yet if there is no silence, our speech degenerates into babble.

“But God doesn’t answer. Why don’t I get any answer?” It is the most frequent complaint regarding prayer. The obvious response is “Are you listening? Have you spent as much time listening as you have speaking?”

Only out of disciplined, quiet, attentive listening is it possible then to answer God’s speech in free prayers, unscripted—not “set” this time—prayers responding to the story. We can respond as participants, as we experience our story being assimilated into God’s story. “Let your Bibles become all autobiographical” is the way one pastor, Alexander Whyte, put it.

For Scripture is not basically a book of information in which we learn about “the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell.” It is not for the most part a history book in which we learn all about

the cultures of the ancient East. And it certainly is not a science text in which we are instructed in the Second Law of Thermodynamics. It is a conversation between God and God's people—us. God creating us and God saving us, while we are given generous time to speak our belief and doubt, our praise and pain—whatever—and while we take our place in this marvelous story that comes together in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

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