

Worship Through the Lord's Prayer

Psalm 131

- 1 A Song of Ascents. Of David.
Lord, my heart is not haughty,
Nor my eyes lofty.
Neither do I concern myself with great matters,
Nor with things too profound for me.
- 2 Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.
- 3 O Israel, hope in the Lord
From this time forth and forever.

Entry into a place of intimacy with God is not like walking into your neighborhood church. It has stages, elements through which we ordinarily pass. These stages don't constitute a closed system. They aren't a set of rules, but an indication of the things we usually pass through as we draw closer and closer to the heart of God.

Psalm 131 describes a state of being with God that is restful, and yet the pursuit of that place in His presence was for me an all out battle. I had to overcome many assumptions about myself and my God. Some of you may be better than I am at entering into what my spiritual director has often called "lap time." Still, I find that even those I know who are skilled at "meditation" are not often able to "enter into His rest." One of the most valuable images to me as I learned to accept the blessings of being with God in this way was my own experience of fatherhood. I was often encouraged to remember the joy I felt when my children would fall asleep in my arms or on my chest. My own desire for that kind of closeness with my children became an invitation as I realized how much my Father in heaven desired the same time with me. I fought it like the dickens as the enemy whispered my unworthiness into my ear over and over again, but with time, I learned.

So the process is both painfully simple and wildly challenging.

I want to offer you a way into that kind of intimacy. In order to keep things simple, I'm going to use something very familiar to you to help describe the elements that can lead us into His Presence. I'll use the Lord's Prayer. After all, when Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, this is what He gave them. In it you can find every single thing necessary for worship and intimacy. The difficulty is that we have turned Jesus' set of guidelines for prayer into a prayer itself, made it into a rote prayer, and robbed it of its power. There is, therefore, some danger in teaching worship using Jesus' model. I am not suggesting that you go to your prayer closet and just say the Lord's Prayer over

and over again! Rather, let the structure of the Lord's Prayer shape the structure of your prayer time.

It begins with praise. It is the beginning place. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name!"

Praise is both a protection and a weapon of our warfare against the evil one. The repeated, passionate declaration of God's goodness creates a walled fortress within which we can safely be with God, but it is not worship. Praise precedes worship, and often proceeds from a heart that has known worship, but it is not our goal. This is why we usually speak of "Praise AND Worship." It is often difficult for us to silence the noise of the world when we want to come to God, and praise is the most common beginning place.

Teachers on centering prayer have for ages known that we cannot simply still our hearts and minds. We cannot simply turn off our thoughts and feelings. What they teach, and what we can do, is focus them intently on God, returning our attention to Him again and again until the thoughts and noises from "outside" grow faint and distract us less.

Praise is the way you and I can declare His goodness in the face of a mountain of distractions, and permit our hearts to focus on Him.

The more we live our lives in a state of praise, the less intentional this piece becomes during our private devotions, though it always persists. In the beginning though, we use praise very intentionally and repetitively. Like Jehoshaphat, leading his people against the Moabites and Ammonites, we send out the song ahead of us, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." (2 Chronicles 20:21)

This is not worship, not intimacy, but it is part of the preparation for it. And it tends to be repetitive. You can take a phrase like that, or any other from Scripture to begin to seek Him, and repeat it over and over again, declaring this truth in the face of all that seems to threaten you. (Imagine how many times the singers repeated that phrase as they marched through the wilderness of Tekoa!) I like to use lines from the Psalms in particular, but there are many declarations of God's faithfulness, His goodness and mercy to which you can turn.

In my journey toward worship, there were many days during which that declaration was all I could manage. I repeated phrases from the Psalms, but often God gave me lines from songs to repeat in my head instead. There is a value in music that I don't quite understand yet, and so if you can "sing praises to the Lord," I encourage you to do that, even if it's silent. Thank goodness for MP3 players! For years now, I have found the most release into His praise through music that speaks a more modern musical language. I really began to suspect what it was my heart yearned for as I heard Darlene Zschech cry with astounding passion, "Shout to the Lord!" Since that time, other artists like Matt Redman and Chris Tomlin, and groups like Mercy Me and Casting Crowns

have often been able to lead me into unselfconscious praise.

But having drifted far from the Hymnal for some years, the Father has led me back to some of the treasures there as well. "Alleluia, sing to Jesus!" can draw the same shouts of praise from me now that I have learned how from other voices. Those great hymns had become too familiar, and had been sung too many times around me without a drop of passion for the God Who Saves, and had become as dry and lifeless as the paper on which they were printed. I'm grateful that my time away has restored some of those beautiful songs of praise. My spiritual director reminds me often that my time repeating the Psalms and other Scriptures, and letting my heart soak in music of praise has "renewed my mind" (Romans 12:2) and enabled me to hear with new ears, and to sing with a new tongue.

The next part of entering into His rest is actually pretty uncomfortable for most of us, and so we have taken the second sentence of the Lord's Prayer and turned it into some eschatological mumbling, a wish for an unimaginable future.

"Thy Kingdom come."

Getting intimate with God means getting real, with ourselves and with Him. "Thy Kingdom come" is not a wish for some future event. It is Jesus' invitation for us to come before God with the deepest of our frustrations and hurts. "Oh, God, I just KNOW that this is not the life you meant for me and for all your children! I hate that we are not living in daily communion with you as Adam once walked with you. I want Your kingdom! I want your Kingdom! I don't want this world, I want YOU!"

I find that, when I am led into this kind of intercession, tears often come. Not, "Oh, poor me," tears, but tears born of the Father's crushing sorrow at our present state of separation. This is the sorrow that overcame Jesus as he cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34, NKJV) My own ache to see His Kingdom finds an echo in the Father's heart, and I can't do much but weep for what is not yet. Thy Kingdom come, Lord!

To be sure, we are not encouraged by our culture or the enemy to face these deep longings. We are told that we need to be more "sensitive" to our feelings, but I'm not talking about "learning to cry." This is learning to "cry out." This is learning to bring our destitution before Jesus. This is learning to acknowledge our poverty (both individually and corporately) to ourselves so that we CAN bring it before Jesus.

And closely related to this move toward God is our desire to know and be able to do His will.

"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I think that, as I grew up praying this prayer at bedtime, I never really thought about what this meant. And as I grew older and began to think about it, this phrase really meant, "God, just take over, do what you want."

I now know better. This isn't an invitation for God to remove our freedom from us, but a cry to know His will, and to be able to want it with all my heart. It is an admission that His ways are higher than my ways, and that I cannot know what is best for me or for us, and that I desire to see and to know His will so that I can DO it. This is an admission that all of my efforts, all of our efforts to set the world right have only made things worse. It is an expression of my desire, our desire, to try a new way. His way.

This isn't an easy thing for me to do. I'm a reasonably smart guy. I can figure stuff out. I can make sense of deconstruction and historical critical exegesis and mimetic theory. I can figure out what it is we need to do to put things right, doggone it!

But I can't. Not really. Not at all, and in this moment, I admit it. Even my best efforts, when done from my own thinking, will only add to the problem in the long run. Oh, I may be able to make things look better in the near term, but if I don't do them in obedience rather than in my own will, they only deepen the problem. I can do the very thing God would have me do if I listened, but if I am not doing it out of that place of obedience, its long-term effect will be the opposite of what I intended.

Nonetheless, Lord, not my will but Thine be done.

"Give us this day our daily bread."

A lot has been said and written about this phrase. Some have even gone so far as to equate this request with the bread that is Jesus' flesh, given for the world, and so they have seen something Eucharistic in it. I see it a lot more simply. These are the words of a man who spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting. This man had angels come and minister to Him in the wilderness after his confrontation with Satan. This man actually trusted in God's providence on a day to day basis.

The surrender of our own capacity to provide for ourselves is a part of entering into intimacy with God whose importance just can't be overstated. It isn't an invitation to laziness, but a surrender, completely and utterly, of our illusion that hard work will generate the provision we need. Many, many people around the globe work much harder than you and I do, and still watch their children starve. We have no control of this, and the illusion that we do stands smack between us and the God Who Provides. We cannot be intimate with a false god, and the god who rewards those who rely on their own hard work rather than on Him is a false god.

Like the children of Israel in the desert, God asks that we allow Him to provide provision for today. Just today. (Remember that when the people tried to gather more manna than they needed for a day, on the second day it spoiled and bred worms.)

The desire to secure my future and the future of my family is so strong, the social pressure to be conformed to this part of the world so overwhelming that I do need to ask daily for the grace to surrender provision for tomorrow, and to trust for today. "Lord, keep my eyes fixed firmly on You, and do not let them stray to the millions of futures that may lie ahead. Give me grace to trust you more fully today than I did yesterday."

"And forgive us our trespasses/debts/sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us."

One thing remains between me and the Father's arms.

My sin.

I cannot come to the realization of who God is, and who I am to Him, without also knowing in that very instant, the depth of my desertion. I have struggled to do well by virtue of my own insight and will, and have made things immeasurably worse. I have done all in my power to provide for my future and that of my family, and others have died as a result. I have treated other things, created things, as though they were worthy of worship, and my heart has been twisted by it. I cannot even begin to open my eyes to the God of Perfect Love without seeing how I have abandoned that Love in search of gods I could control, and if He does not forgive me, there is no entrance into His presence.

This sentence is not only a cry for mercy, but a proclamation of mercy. There are certainly days when I am only able to cry out for mercy, but those are fewer and fewer these days. Now I still feel His pain at the separation I have caused, but I also know His joy in my return. It is a cry filled with sorrow and relief, all at the same time. It is the fulcrum on which turns the transition of mourning to joy.

And yes, forgiveness of others results from receiving this restoration. The last tendrils of the weeds that sought to drown me in oceans of guilt are cut away by the fierceness of His forgiveness. I am no longer bound to others in bitterness, even as I am no longer bound to condemnation.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

I think it's important that this comes *after* God deals with our sin. Personally, I don't think I can pray this until I know that Jesus' blood has made me right with God because otherwise I'd be "tempted" to think that the hard times are punishments. In fact, this sentence doesn't mean what most of us intend when we say it. That is to say, most of us, me included until I was challenged to reflect on this sentence, mean, "God, don't do this,

but do that instead." "Don't bring me into temptation, don't test me, but rather, just save me from all that stuff."

I could wish that Jesus had intended that, but then if He did, I'd have to say that God has ignored my pleas for years and years. Because He has brought me into temptation, into times of testing and trial. He hasn't just saved me from all that stuff. And He didn't save Jesus either. Think about it, the very first thing God does after Jesus' baptism is (by the Holy Spirit) drive Him into the wilderness *to be tempted of Satan!*

As I prayed over this reality, I began to think that this sentence could be better translated, "Do not lead us (me) into temptation *unless You also* deliver me from evil." That is, God does not test me, tempt me, (they're the very same word in Greek) except that He also provides a way out. Not a way that I have to find, but a way that brings me into greater intimacy with Him as I lean harder on His strength and mercy, His providence.

Then I went to the original language to see if the meaning I'd been given in prayer made any sense, and it does. All of those petitions earlier in the prayer are in a Greek mood called "imperative." That is, we're kind of ordering God to do these things. Not really, but this mood is our way of expressing our absolute confidence that God will indeed do these things, even if we're not feeling all that confident in the moment.

But here, we don't get an "imperative" mood. "Lead" is in a "subjunctive" mood (it's a little more complicated than that, but we have a subjunctive mood in English) that expresses hope, but not certainty. In English, we use the subjunctive when we say that someone "might" do something.

So we are no longer expressing absolute trust that God will do this "not leading" thing. Instead we are saying, "We trust that you won't but that you will also..." (In some older uses, "but" can mean "except that," in English.)

When I shared this with a friend, she agreed much to quickly for my liking. "Duh!" I thought to myself as she said, "Yes! After all Jesus said, 'I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.' (John 16:33, ESV) That's one of those 'promises' of Scripture we never want to claim!"

So we *don't* pray that God will not tempt us, or test us, but rather we express confidence (deliver is in a funny kind of Greek subjunctive deponent mood that makes it "active.") that when, not if, God tests us, He will give of Himself to lead us out. This is, whether we like it or not, the place where intimacy with the Father grows. Not in the easy moments, but in the times of testing in the furnace when the dross is gradually removed, and our relationship to Him becomes more and more pure. This is the time where we "stand on the promises," where we declare His goodness in the absence of any immediate proof. This is where our vision of Him and His mercy and His glory are made more and more

clear, so that we can pray with unalloyed joy:

"For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen."

No, Jesus didn't teach this phase, and so I could stop here. But I include it because this is the very point of all that He did teach.

Once we have allowed our God to lead us through each and all of these places we will discover ourselves in that place of unending worship, crying out with inexpressible joy that kingdom and power and glory belong only to the God of Mercy whom we now see, face to face. In this place of ecstatic worship our hearts are actually changed. Hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh, and our capacity to love our families and our communities is infinitely increased. We no longer love from our own strength and insight and illusion of security, but we pour out love that has its origins in the Father's own heart.

Some closing words...

Some years ago Elizabeth Kubler-Ross outlined five discreet "stages" of grieving, and many who didn't understand them quickly made them into a step-wise ladder one ought to follow in order to "grieve properly." I really don't intend to present here these elements of entering into God's presence as though they were all required, and in the given order! I have known great comfort and exhilaration many times without passing through all of these pieces. Indeed, in my own prayer life, in my own prayer closet, I rarely encounter more than two of them at a time, and certainly not in "order."

But all of these pieces are a part of the process of developing intimacy with God. You may be led to start in a different place than I was, and thanks be to God for that if you are. Or you may not be ready to deal with some piece of that puzzle for a year, or for years. God in His mercy will lead you into each place of healing as you are ready, not according to a predetermined schedule.

What I can say for certainty is that each time He shows me something new that stands between me and His heart and helps me deal with it, I experience His love in ways that had literally been impossible for me before, and He will do the same for you.

And in that love is healing.

For you and yours.