

The Song of Prayer

P RAYER IS THE GREATEST gift with which God blessed His Son at his creation. It was then what it is to become: the single voice Creator and creation share; the song the Son sings to the Father, Who returns the thanks it offers Him unto the Son. Endless the harmony, and endless, too, the joyous concord of the love they give forever to each other. And in this, creation is extended. God gives thanks to His extension in His Son. His Son gives thanks for his creation, in the song of his creating in his Father's Name. The love they share is what all prayer will be throughout eternity, when time is done. For such it was before time seemed to be.

To you who are in time a little while, prayer takes the form that best will suit your need. You have but one. What God created one must recognize its oneness, and rejoice that what illusions seemed to separate is one forever in the Mind of God. Prayer now must be the means by which God's Son leaves separate goals and separate interests and turns in holy gladness to the truth of union in his Father and himself.

Lay down your dreams, you holy Son of God, and rising up as God created you, dispense with idols and remember Him. Prayer will sustain you now, and bless you as you lift your heart to Him in rising song that reaches higher and then higher still, until both high and low have disappeared.

In this and the two succeeding issues of the Rays, we reprint with permission from the Foundation for Inner Peace the complete text of The Song of Prayer: Prayer, Forgiveness, Healing, which is "an extension of the principles of A Course in Miracles," available from FFIP, P.O. Box 635, Tiburon CA 94920



Russian portrait-icon, late nineteenth century, Russian Orthodox Cathedral, London

Prayer of the Heart

Russian hesychasts literally practiced St. Paul's injunction, "Pray without ceasing." The numinous St. Serafim of Sarov is shown engaged in a thousand-day vigil in the forest.

Faith in your goal will grow and hold you up as you ascend the shining stairway to the lawns of Heaven and the gate of peace. For this is prayer, and here salvation is. This is the way. It is God's gift to you.

True Prayer

Prayer is a way offered by the Holy Spirit to reach God. It is not merely a question or an entreaty. It cannot succeed until you realize that it asks for nothing. How else could it serve its purpose? It is impossible to pray for idols and hope to

reach God. True prayer must avoid the pitfall of asking to entreat. Ask, rather, to receive what is already given; to accept what is already there.

You have been told to ask the Holy Spirit for the answer to any specific problem, and that you will receive a specific answer if such is your need. You have also been told that there is only one problem and one answer. In prayer this is not contradictory. There are decisions to make here, and they must be made whether they be illusions or not. You cannot be asked to accept answers which are beyond the level of need that you can recognize. Therefore, it is not the form of the question that matters, nor how it is asked. The form of the answer, if given by God, will suit your need as you see it. This is merely an echo of the reply of His Voice. The real sound is always a song of thanksgiving and of love.

holiness entreat, being fully entitled to everything love has to offer? And it is to Love you go in prayer. Prayer is an offering; a giving up of yourself to be at one with Love. There is nothing to ask because there is nothing left to want. That nothingness becomes the altar of God. It disappears in Him.

This is not a level of prayer that everyone can attain as yet. Those who have not reached it still need your help in prayer because their asking is not yet based upon acceptance. Help in prayer does not mean that another mediates between you and God. But it does mean that another stands beside you and helps to raise you up to Him. One who has realized the goodness of God prays without fear. And one who prays without fear cannot but reach Him. He can therefore also reach His Son, wherever he may be and whatever form he may seem to take.

In prayer you overlook your specific needs as you see them, and let them go into God's hands. There they become your gifts to Him, for they tell Him that you would have no gods before Him; no Love but His.

You cannot, then, ask for the echo. It is the song that is the gift. Along with it come the overtones, the harmonics, the echoes, but these are secondary. In true prayer you hear only the song. All the rest is merely added. You have sought first the Kingdom of Heaven, and all else has indeed been given you.

The secret of true prayer is to forget the things you think you need. To ask for the specific is much the same as to look on sin and then forgive it. Also in the same way, in prayer you overlook your specific needs as you see them, and let them go into God's hands. There they become your gifts to Him, for they tell Him that you would have no gods before Him; no Love but His. What could His answer be but your remembrance of Him? Can this be traded for a bit of trifling advice about a problem of an instant's duration? God answers only for eternity. But still, all little answers are contained in this.

Prayer is a stepping aside; a letting go, a quiet time of listening and loving. It should not be confused with supplication of any kind, because it is a way of remembering your holiness. Why should

Praying to Christ in anyone is true prayer because it is a gift of thanks to His Father. To ask that Christ be but Himself is not an entreaty. It is a song of thanksgiving for what you are. Herein lies the power of prayer. It asks nothing and receives everything. This prayer can be shared because it receives for everyone. To pray with one who knows that this is true is to be answered. Perhaps the specific form of resolution for a specific problem will occur to either of you; it does not matter which. Perhaps it will reach both, if you are genuinely attuned to one another. It will come because you have realized that Christ is in both of you. That is its only truth.

The Ladder of Prayer

Prayer has no beginning and no end. It is a part of life. But it does change in form and grow with learning until it reaches its formless state and fuses into total communication with God. In its asking form it need not, and often does not, make appeal to God, or even involve belief in Him. At these levels prayer is merely wanting, out of a sense of scarcity and lack.

These forms of prayer, or asking-out-of-need, always involve feelings of weakness and inadequacy, and could never be made by a Son of God who knows Who he is. No one, then, who is sure of his Identity could pray in these forms. Yet it is also true that no one who is uncertain of his Identity can avoid praying in this way. And prayer is as continual as life. Everyone prays without ceasing. Ask and you have received, for you have established what it is you want.

It is also possible to reach a higher form of asking-out-of-need, for in this world prayer is reparative, and so it must entail levels of learning. Here, the asking may be addressed to God in honest belief, though not yet with understanding. A vague and usually unstable sense of identification has generally been reached, but tends to be blurred by a

An enemy is the symbol of an imprisoned Christ. And who could He be except yourself? The prayer for enemies thus becomes a prayer for your own freedom. Now it is no longer a contradiction in terms. It has become a statement of the unity of Christ and a recognition of His sinlessness. And now it has become holy, for it acknowledges the Son of God as he was created.

Let it never be forgotten that prayer at any level is always for yourself. If you unite with anyone in prayer, you make him part of you. The enemy is you, as is the Christ. Before it can become holy, then, prayer becomes a choice. You do not choose for another. You can but choose for yourself. Pray truly for your enemies, for herein lies your own salvation. Forgive them for your sins, and you will be forgiven indeed.

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deep-rooted sense of sin. It is possible at this level to continue to ask for things of this world in various forms, and it is also possible to ask for gifts such as honesty or goodness, and particularly for forgiveness for the many sources of guilt that inevitably underlie any prayer of need. Without guilt there is no scarcity. The sinless have no needs.

At this level also comes that curious contradiction in terms known as "praying for one's enemies." The contradiction lies not in the actual words, but rather in the way in which they are usually interpreted. While you believe you have enemies, you have limited prayer to the laws of this world, and have also limited your ability to receive and to accept to the same narrow margins. And yet, if you have enemies you have need of prayer, and great need, too. What does the phrase really mean? Pray for yourself, that you may not seek to imprison Christ and thereby lose the recognition of your own Identity. Be traitor to no one, or you will be treacherous to yourself.

Prayer is a ladder reaching up to Heaven. At the top there is a transformation much like your own, for prayer is part of you. The things of earth are left behind, all unremembered. There is no asking, for there is no lack. Identity in Christ is fully recognized as set forever, beyond all change and incorruptible. The light no longer flickers, and will never go out. Now, without needs of any kind, and clad forever in the pure sinlessness that is the gift of God to you, His Son, prayer can again become what it was meant to be. For now it rises as a song of thanks to your Creator, sung without words, or thoughts, or vain desires, unneedful now of anything at all. So it extends, as it was meant to do. And for this giving God Himself gives thanks.

God is the goal of every prayer, giving it timelessness instead of end. Nor has it a beginning, because the goal has never changed. Prayer in its earlier forms is an illusion, because there is no need for a ladder to reach what one has never left. Yet prayer is part of forgiveness as long as for-

givenness, itself an illusion, remains unattained. Prayer is tied up with learning until the goal of learning has been reached. And then all things will be transformed together and returned unblemished into the Mind of God. Being beyond learning, this state cannot be described. The stages necessary to its attainment, however, need to be understood, if peace is to be restored to God's Son, who lives now with the illusion of death and the fear of God.

Praying for Others

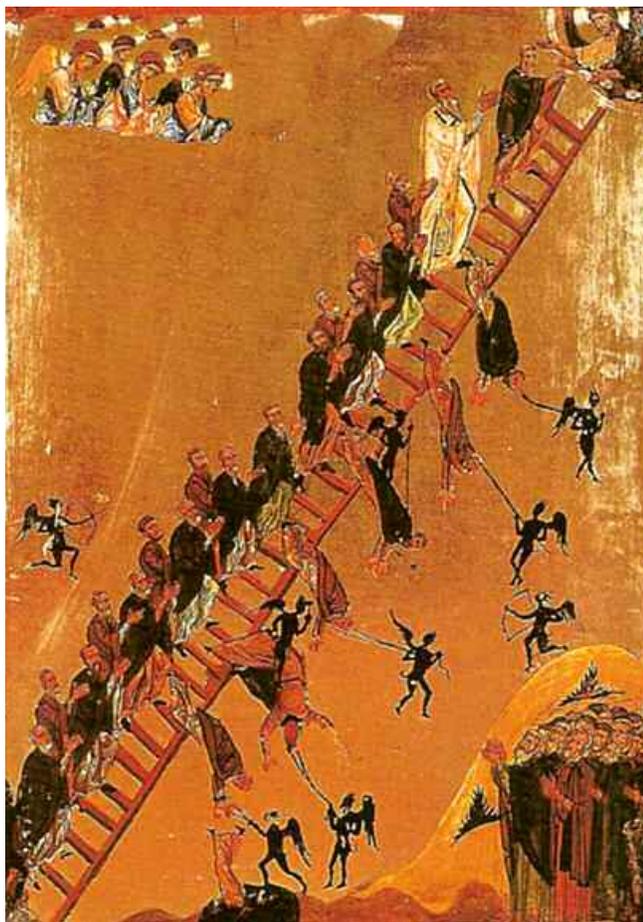
We said that prayer is always for yourself, and this is so. Why, then, should you pray for others at all? And if you should, how should you do it? Praying for others, if rightly understood, becomes a means for lifting your projections of guilt from your brother, and enabling you to recognize it is not he who is hurting you. The poisonous thought that he is your enemy, your evil counterpart, your nemesis, must be relinquished before you can be saved from guilt. For this the means is prayer, of rising power and with ascending goals, until it reaches even up to God.

The earlier forms of prayer, at the bottom of the ladder, will not be free from envy and malice. They call for vengeance, not for love. Nor do they come from one who understands that they are calls for death, made out of fear by those who cherish guilt. They call upon a vengeful god, and it is he who seems to answer them. Hell cannot be asked for another, and then escaped by him who asks for it. Only those who are in hell can ask for hell. Those who have been forgiven, and who accepted their forgiveness, could never make a prayer like that.

At these levels, then, the learning goal must be to recognize that prayer will bring an answer only in the form in which the prayer was made. This is enough. From here it will be an easy step to the next levels. The next ascent begins with this:

“What I have asked for for my brother is not what I would have. Thus have I made of him my enemy.”

It is apparent that this step cannot be reached by anyone who sees no value or advantage to himself in setting others free. This may be long delayed, because it may seem to be dangerous instead of merciful. To the guilty there seems indeed to be a



Icon, twelfth century, Monastery of St. Katherine, Mount Sinai

The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Based on a treatise of St. John Climacus, the Christian life is conceived as a ladder with thirty rungs, each corresponding to a virtue. Ascent to complete Christ-consciousness is impeded by the temptations of vices, personified by tiny devils.

real advantage in having enemies, and this imagined gain must go, if enemies are to be set free. Guilt must be given up, and not concealed. Nor can this be done without some pain, and a glimpse of the merciful nature of this step may for some time be followed by a deep retreat into fear. For fear's defenses are fearful in themselves, and when they are recognized they bring their fear with them. Yet what advantage has an illusion of escape ever brought a prisoner? His real escape from guilt can lie only in the recognition that the guilt has gone. And how can this be recognized as long as he hides it in another, and does not see it as his own? Fear of escape makes it difficult to welcome freedom, and to make a jailer of an enemy seems to be safety. How, then, can he be released without an insane fear for yourself? You have made of him your

salvation and your escape from guilt. Your investment in this escape is heavy, and your fear of letting it go is strong.

Stand still an instant, now, and think what you have done. Do not forget that it is you who did it, and who can therefore let it go. Hold out your hand. This enemy has come to bless you. Take his blessing, and feel how your heart is lifted and your fear released. Do not hold on to it, nor onto him. He is a Son of God, along with you. He is no jailer, but a messenger of Christ. Be this to him, that you may see him thus.

It is not easy to realize that prayers for things, for status, for human love, for external “gifts” of any kind, are always made to set up jailers and to hide from guilt. These things are used for goals that substitute for God, and therefore distort the purpose of prayer. The desire for them is the prayer. One need not ask explicitly. The goal of God is lost in the quest for lesser goals of any kind, and prayer becomes requests for enemies. The power of prayer can be quite clearly recognized even in this. No one who wants an enemy will fail to find one. But just as surely will he lose the only true goal that is given him. Think of the cost, and understand it well. All other goals are at the cost of God.

Praying with Others

Until the second level at least begins, one cannot share in prayer. For until that point, each one must ask for different things. But once the need to hold the other as an enemy has been questioned, and the reason for doing so has been recognized, if only for an instant, it becomes possible to join in prayer. Enemies do not share a goal. It is in this their enmity is kept. Their separate wishes are their arsenals; their fortresses in hate. The key to rising further still in prayer lies in this simple thought; this change of mind:

We go together, you and I.

Now it is possible to help in prayer, and so reach up yourself. This step begins the quicker ascent, but there are still many lessons to learn. The way is open, and hope is justified. Yet it is likely at first that what is asked for even by those who join in prayer is not the goal that prayer should truly seek.

Even together you may ask for things, and thus set up but an illusion of a goal you share. You may ask together for specifics and not realize that you are asking for effects without the cause. And this you cannot have. For no one can receive effects alone, asking a cause from which they do not come to offer them to him.

Even the joining, then, is not enough, if those who pray together do not ask, before all else, what is the Will of God. From this Cause only can the answer come in which are all specifics satisfied; all separate wishes unified in one. Prayer for specifics always asks to have the past repeated in some way. What was enjoyed before, or seemed to be; what was another's and he seemed to love—all these are but illusions from the past. The aim of prayer is to release the present from its chains of past illusions; to let it be a freely-chosen remedy from every choice that stood for a mistake. What prayer can offer now so far exceeds all that you asked before that it is pitiful to be content with less.

You have chosen a new-born chance each time you pray. And would you stifle and imprison it in ancient prisons, when the chance has come to free yourself from all of them at once? Do not restrict your asking. Prayer can bring the peace of God. What time-bound thing can give you more than this, in just the little space that lasts until it crumbles into dust?

The Ladder Ends

Prayer is a way to true humility. And here again it rises slowly up, and grows in strength and love and holiness. Let it but leave the ground where it begins to rise to God, and true humility will come at last to grace the mind that thought it was alone and stood against the world. Humility brings peace because it does not claim that you must rule the universe, nor judge all things as you would have them be. All little gods it gladly lays aside, not in resentment, but in honesty and recognition that they do not serve.

Illusions and humility have goals so far apart they cannot coexist, nor share a dwelling-place where they can meet. Where one has come the other disappears. The truly humble have no goal but God because they need no idols, and defense no longer serves a purpose. Enemies are useless

now, because humility does not oppose. It does not hide in shame because it is content with what it is, knowing creation is the Will of God. Its selflessness is Self, and this it sees in every meeting, where it gladly joins with every Son of God, whose purity it recognizes that it shares with him.

Now prayer is lifted from the world of things, of bodies, and of gods of every kind, and you can rest in holiness at last. Humility has come to teach you how to understand your glory as God's Son, and recognize the arrogance of sin. A dream has veiled the face of Christ from you. Now can you look upon His sinlessness. High has the ladder risen. You have come almost to Heaven. There is little more to learn before the journey is complete. Now can you say to everyone who comes to join in prayer with you: I cannot go without you, for you are a part of me. And so he is in truth. Now can you pray only for what you truly share with him. For you have understood he never left, and you, who seemed alone, are one with him.

The ladder ends with this, for learning is no

The Mystic's Prayer

Lay me to sleep in sheltering flame,
O Master of the Hidden Fire!
Wash pure my heart, and cleanse for me
My soul's desire.

In flame of sunrise bathe my mind,
O Master of the Hidden Fire,
That, when I wake, clear-eyed may be
My soul's desire.

—William Sharp

longer needed. Now you stand before the gate of Heaven, and your brother stands beside you there. The lawns are deep and still, for here the place appointed for the time when you should come has waited long for you. Here will time end forever. At this gate eternity itself will join with you. Prayer has become what it was meant to be, for you have recognized the Christ in you. (Continued) □

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