

Intimacy with
GOD

AN INVITATION TO PRAYER

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✧ INTRODUCTION

I have wanted to write a book on prayer for a long time—perhaps because it would incite me to reflect even more on the importance of this subject or perhaps because it would remind me of the constant blessings that prayer can reveal. As I thought more about it, however, it dawned on me that it would be simplistic to attempt to write on this topic as a merely academic exercise to stimulate and provoke critical reflection on the topic with the goal of motivating individuals to engage its practice. My intention here is much broader: not only to provide a careful presentation of the *dimensions* of prayer but also to attest to the *privilege* and *promise* of prayer with the hope that many will discover its *power* anew.

I was born in Brazil, a land that attracts thousands of visitors to its shores. One of its most visited places is *Cristo Redentor* (“Christ the Redeemer”), a statue that stands high on a hilltop overlooking the prosperous and magnificent landscape of Rio de Janeiro, one of Brazil’s largest cities. With outstretched arms,

Cristo Redentor welcomes all visitors alike. The view from the mountaintop is truly breathtaking and awe-inspiring, drawing individuals from all over the world to capture its strikingly scenic sights with photographs and videos that will be ingrained in their memories for years to come. It is interesting to consider that, if one were to climb over the other side of the mountain where the statue is located, one would actually see the whole picture of the place where *Cristo Redentor* stands—and not just its attractive side. Right behind the statue, the fragile shacks of the poor stretch for miles into the distance, deprived of the glorious paradise that tourists come to observe and admire. On one side, beauty. On the other side, heartbreak. And this is the reality of any life and every place. We cannot walk for long in the streets of a city without encountering elements of beauty and elements of tragedy, meandering side by side even when they might refuse to walk hand in hand.

Prayer has often taken a similar path, separating beauty and tragedy in its evocations. We pray with joy in our hearts when the winds of life are in our favor and with cries of sorrow when they are against us. In this book, I suggest that prayer should embrace joy and sorrow, praise and pain, beauty and tragedy—all within the same breath. Life is not sometimes beautiful and other times painful. It is always beautiful *and* painful. So, as we learn to pray unceasingly regardless of our circumstances, we do so remembering that God is also pray-

ing *with* us. When we engage in the act of prayer, we join the Suffering Servant, our risen Lord, who prays *for* us so we may rediscover the beauty of his glory as we remember his nail-pierced hands. Prayer is an invitation to come alive through the Spirit of God who intercedes *through* us and helps us envision new possibilities in the midst of our human impossibilities. Prayer, in a nutshell, is a response to the grace of God already at work in us.

As a partnership between the human spirit and the Spirit of God, prayer is a two-way street. It is sharing our most sacred desires, deepest longings, and heaviest burdens as we are guided back to the paths of self-discovery by the Spirit of God, to examine ever more carefully our desires, longings, and burdens. At its most fundamental level, prayer is an act of worship, and every act of worship strengthens our spirit. At its most practical level, prayer is an act of obedience, and every act of obedience strengthens our will. At its most realistic level, prayer is an act of trust. We trust that God is there, that he hears our prayer, and that he knows how best to answer. Every act of trust through prayer strengthens our faith. For these reasons, prayer carries the seed of hope as we travel through arduous wastelands and sun-scorched earth. Prayer also carries the sound of silence as we journey through long, twisting, desert-like roads. Prayer is kindled by the glare of light as we encounter dark tunnels, dead ends, and turnarounds along the

pathway of life. Finally, prayer is deeply grounded in the love of God, who invites us to embark on the many unpredictable sailings of life, led by his always present, never failing, overly abundant love.

Some remarks regarding the structure of this book are necessary. Any attentive reader will observe that this book is divided into three parts. I have intentionally divided it following a Trinitarian approach to prayer. Although this categorization is certainly not the only way to understand the dimensions of prayer, it is representative of the role each Person of the Trinity plays in the life of the believer as we pray. **Part I** deals specifically with the unique contribution of contemplative prayer as we learn to honor and enjoy the presence of God the Father. Because prayer seeks connection with God, those who pray must learn to center their attention on God's presence. But prayer does not only seek to establish a connection with God; it also seeks to recruit his intervention on earth. As such, **Part II** addresses the role, ministry, and opportunities of intercessory prayer based on the model of Jesus Christ, who made supplication for us while he was on earth and lives even now to intercede for us. Because prayer in this form is an act of supplication, it agonizes over the hardships and sufferings that characterize our lived experience on earth, seeking the aid, direction, and consolation of God at every turn. Finally, as a two-way street, prayer must learn to listen to the voice of

God in order to receive direction, blessing, and guidance for our lives and the decisions we make. In this lifelong process of learning to hear and discern the voice of God, the primary goal is to remain open to the Holy Spirit and recognize the Spirit's voice with its many inflections. Therefore, **Part III** invites us to learn and discover the many ways God speaks so we may learn to be guided by his voice in its many inflections.

In my own journey with God, I have learned a few things, and I hope to share some of those lessons in this book. When I was a senior in college, I came across invaluable books that taught me the way and value of prayer. As an international student, I did not have the resources to purchase these books (or any book, for that matter), but I discovered we could get books through interlibrary loans, a free service the library provided that allowed us to renew them up to six months! And that is how I became immersed in a world I never knew existed: the writings of the mystics and heroes of the faith who helped me understand the depths of prayer. I became acquainted with Francis de Sales, Teresa of Ávila, Madame Guyon, François Fénelon, Brother Lawrence, Thomas à Kempis, William Law, Thomas Kelly, Rees Howells, and many others. In my mind, these individuals were spiritual giants who—despite the fact that they lived in contexts of great struggle, political unrest, tragic loss, and social deprivation—learned to live holy lives made possible by the love of God. Their writings made a huge

impact on me, and I have tried to implement some of their wisdom in my own life.

Prayer is simple. Prayer kneels when life gets hard, stands on God's promises when life seems uncertain, and enjoys the gifts of God when all seems just right. As a senior in college who desired to know God, one thing became evident: if I wanted to learn more about God, the best way was to *know* God. It would have been a mistake to sacrifice the actual experience of God on the altar of intellectual curiosity. Experience and knowledge complement each other—neither should be sacrificed. Similarly, in order for us to learn about prayer, the best way to do that is to pray. A few suggestions can help us learn to become better at it, and that's what I hope to offer in this book. I am afraid too many contemporary books on prayer present it as a “strategy” in order to experience something other than what prayer is meant to be. Prayer is neither magical nor mechanical. It cannot be reduced to a set of principles or utilized as a strategic plan for some ulterior or utilitarian purpose. Prayer is both a discipline and a work. And it is often hard work.

During the many years of my life when heartbreak and loss reminded me of the fragility of life, I discovered that God is still actively restoring, healing, blessing, and re-creating beauty in this world, which is partially made possible by our response through prayer. As we respond to God's invitation to walk with him side by side, hand in hand—especially when we might not

feel like it—we discover that God can turn every difficulty into a blessed opportunity as we pray. The invitation is open. The journey into the depths of prayer might prove to be one of the most profound invitations we receive on this side of eternity. I hope you decide to take up the challenge.

PART I

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

“Turn to the Lord with your whole heart, let him be the most important part of your life, and your soul will find rest. If you put God first, you will see his kingdom blossom within you, for the kingdom of God is living in peace and joy with the Holy Spirit, a thing given to those who do not yearn for him with all their hearts.”

—Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

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“Listen to your soul as it says, ‘I am *willing* with all the power of my being that the desire of God be accomplished within me. I am *willing* to be here, ceasing from all my activity and all of my power, so that God might have his desire of fully possessing me.’”

—Madame Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*

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“The way of prayer is not a subtle escape from the Christian economy of incarnation and redemption. It is a special way of following Christ, of sharing in his passion and resurrection and in his redemption of the world. . . . The way of prayer brings us face to face with the shame and indignity of the false self that seeks to live for itself and to enjoy the ‘consolation of prayer’ for its own sake.”

—Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*

1 ✧ FROM THE SHALLOWS TO THE DEPTHS

We encounter the presence of the Father on earth in many different ways. We get glimpses of God's character by observing nature. We also discover his attributes through the smiles of children, the embrace between an older couple, flowers as they wither in winter or bloom in early spring. If we are attentive to our surroundings, God's presence can be felt and observed almost anywhere, for God is everywhere at all times at any given moment. But apart from nurturing a meaningful relationship with God, these sporadic encounters would be devoid of permanence—not because God would choose to purposefully hide his presence but because we are not thoughtful and attentive enough to see God in the mundane aspects of life.

It gives me great assurance to know that even before I ever entertained the thought of seeking a relationship with God, he was already seeking a relationship with me. God longs to make himself known and is always pursuing fellowship with

God's children. God's pursuit of us precedes our finding God. In fact, God placed a longing in our hearts so that when we found him our relationship would be truly reciprocal, even if it remained unequal. Augustine of Hippo captures the essence of this intricate relationship with these poignant words in his famous *Confessions*: "Despite our lowness, human beings aspire to praise you, though we be but a particle of your creation. You awake in us a delight at praising you. You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its place of rest in you."¹ The rest every restless soul longs to find can be appropriated only by the continual cultivation of a life of prayer. American Trappist monk Thomas Merton said, "Prayer begins not so much with 'considerations' as with a 'return to the heart,' finding one's deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God, who is the source of our being and our life."²

Similarly, a famous quote attributed to philosopher Blaise Pascal helps us understand the unique longing that each person has that can only be fulfilled with the presence of God: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each [human] which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God

1. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine: Modern English Version* (Revell, Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 15–16.

2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Group, 2014), 5–6.

the Creator.” But this is a mere paraphrase of Pascal’s actual words, even if in principle they are similar enough to render a good interpretation of his thoughts: “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in [humanity] a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”³ As Pascal’s words illustrate, only God can fill our deepest longings.

Henri Nouwen said it so well when he affirmed, “There is a deep hole in your being, like an abyss. You will never succeed in filling that hole because your needs are inexhaustible.”⁴ And until we are satisfied in God alone, our lives will remain in the void. David discovered this truth when he wrote, “My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, I will seek” (Psalm 27:8). God rewards the quest to seek his face. Thus, our prayer is birthed in a deep desire to be immersed in his presence first as we enter his gates with thanksgiving in our hearts and adore his name.

3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 75.

4. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Books, 1999), 3.

Henri Nouwen is one of the greatest spiritual writers of modern times, and he once said, “Prayer is an attitude of an open heart, silently in tune with the Spirit of God, revealing itself in gratitude and contemplation.”⁵ Prayer, then, is not so much the memorization or recitation of a prescribed set of words or particular phrases that have been passed on through tradition and generations, although these certainly have their place in the practice of our Christian faith. But more fundamentally, prayer is the posture that a willing heart takes when humble, simple, and common words are directed to God in an attempt to express the condition of our soul. Whether these words come out of a state of desperation, desire, gratitude, or appreciation, prayer conveys the most profound and banal sentiments of our hearts. That is why prayer reveals in many ways one’s highest aspirations and yearnings for *saturation* as well as one’s deepest frustrations with *fragmentation* in our world. As we experience the detriments of a fallen world, coated with faded colors of brokenness and unreasonable loss, prayer becomes a mechanism by which these broken pieces can once again be put together and become saturated with hope, peace, and purpose. More than a tool, a weapon, or a strategy, prayer is a vehicle of love, a sign of hope, and a sigh of relief. For that reason, prayer is never superficial, even when it is simple. And

5. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 62.

when words fail to adequately express our utter need for God and reliance on his supernatural intervention, prayer can transcend through groans, tears, silence, and exclamations.

In *Spiritual Direction*, Henri Nouwen recounts a parable told by renowned Russian author Leo Tolstoy that captures the essence of prayer:

Three Russian monks lived on a faraway island. Nobody ever went there, but one day their bishop decided to make a pastoral visit. When he arrived, he discovered that the monks didn't even know the Lord's Prayer. So he spent all his time and energy teaching them the "Our Father" and then left, satisfied with his pastoral work. But when his ship had left the island and was back in the open sea, he suddenly noticed the three hermits walking on the water—in fact, they were running after the ship! When they reached it, they cried, "Dear Father, we have forgotten the prayer you taught us." The bishop, overwhelmed by what he was seeing and hearing, said, "But, dear brothers, how then do you pray?" They answered, "Well, we just say, "Dear God, there are three of us, and there are three of you: have mercy on us!" The bishop, awestruck by their sanctity and simplicity, said, "Go back to your land and be at peace."⁶

6. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 56.

Prayer is so simple yet so difficult for many of us. We think we have to have all the right words to communicate with our heavenly Father or be in the right mood to come close to his presence when, in reality, God is but a breath away. He waits for us to invite him to guide us, lead us, direct us, comfort us, move us, forgive us, and renew us. Sometimes when we don't know what to say or how to pray, one phrase will stop God in his tracks, as blind Bartimaeus found out: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47, 48). Even better, if you don't have much time to pray, or don't remember that Jesus is a descendant of King David, a simple prayer can have far-reaching effects: "Come near and rescue me" (Psalm 69:18). This rescue is what God's grace accomplishes for us as we invite him to come near, for if we shut him out of our lives he will not force his way in. His uncontrolling love always waits for us to open our hearts so that we may experience the redeeming power, restructuring mindset, restorative energy, and redefining moment that is possible when we freely choose to abandon ourselves to his grace.

Closing the Door to Noise

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
—Matthew 6:6

In order to open the door of dialogue with our heavenly Father, we must first intentionally and purposefully close the door to the noise that distracts us from nurturing a relationship with God. By closing the door to noise, I do not mean the *external* noise that cannot be controlled, such as traffic noise, neighborhood noise, or work noise—the many different types of noise generated by full households, busy offices, hard-working factories, or active jobs that constantly demand our attention. In the modern world, unless we become hermits (living in solitude), cenobites (living in intentional communities), or are naturally contemplative like Mary, it will be difficult to *close the door* completely or literally, although it is certainly important to establish for ourselves times of prayer that take us away from the routine tasks of life. Instead, closing the door to noise is an *internal* process that involves three steps.

First, we must close the door to the noise of worry. When our thoughts are constantly anxiety-stricken, fear-filled, and worry-plagued, we are unable to pray. But the moment we begin to lift up our eyes to the heavens and offer those concerns wrapped up in the blankets of the unknown, we withdraw our

hearts from the tumultuous noise of the “what-ifs.” As we silence our own thoughts and focus on his word, promise, and presence, prayer will become more engaging and dynamic.

Second, we must close the door to the noise of our daily responsibilities and activities that fill up every area of our minds. One of the things that hinders our prayers is the fact that we have not yet learned to center them on God or redirect them from a problem onto his promises. Instead we allow our minds to wander toward our feelings. We should not be annoyed with our mental wanderings but should simply refocus our attention, choosing to quiet the internal, incessant voice of activity while embracing a posture of internal poise.

Finally, we must close the door to the noise of selfish desires, which are so easily evoked through prayer. We must first recognize them and place them at the feet of the Father for him to purify them and, in the process, bring out the best in ourselves. When we surrender our wants and commit to God’s will, prayer becomes more enjoyable and dynamic. After all, prayer is not about getting all of our wishes granted; it is about surrendering our will so that God’s will may be done. This surrender can only happen when we trust that God sees what we cannot see and that his plan of redemption will ultimately prevail even if God answers a specific prayer with a no.

The Blessings of His Rewards

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
—Matthew 6:6

The more we pray, the more we will discover that prayer is an invitation to a continuous conversation with almighty God. If we trust that God's will is perfect and pleasing and that God desires what is best for his children, then prayer will not be so focused on our needs and wants but on his presence and purpose. God sees every action under the heavens (Proverbs 15:3), weighs every motive of the heart (Proverbs 16:2), and perceives every thought from afar (Psalm 139:2). Before a word is on our tongue, God already knows it completely (Psalm 139:4). It would seem, then, somewhat foolish to think the purpose of prayer is to make God understand how we feel, to bargain with God, or to make him aware of our needs, for he *already knows*. Yet God *wants* us to tell him how we feel and what we desire and need because he cares about us and about every detail of our lives and wants us to communicate with him, like we would with a friend. He wants to be involved in our daily lives so we may learn to be guided by him. He cares about every aspect of our existence and desires a relationship with us, which means he also seeks connection and communication with his children because he loves us and desires to be one with us.

God does not always reward us in the way we think of rewards. When Matthew 6:6 says that God, who sees everything that is done in secret, will reward you, it means God will reward your pursuit of his presence; it does not necessarily refer to material rewards, although sometimes God's blessings come in practical, material, and physical ways so that we may become continual channels of God's grace. When thinking of material rewards, I am reminded of John, who was a lonely, wealthy, cantankerous old man. He worked hard all his life and built a great business that led to great financial success—but he was always alone. One Sunday evening as he was taking a walk around his neighborhood, he realized there was joyous music coming from an old church. John decided to slip into the service quietly so as to not be noticed, and he sat down in a pew in the back. At the close of the service the pastor asked if anyone present would like to give a testimony about how God had blessed them. After several people had spoken, John decided to stand up and share his story. He described how once, when he was a young boy, he had worked all day for a shiny silver dollar. At the end of the day, he was so proud of his accomplishment, and on his way home he heard music coming from a church just like this one. Drawn by the beautiful music, he went inside, and when it came time for the offering, the only money he had was the shiny silver dollar in his pocket. If he dropped the coin in the offering plate, he would be giving

all he had, so it was a difficult decision. But when the offering plate got to him, he let go of that shiny coin and gave it away. He shared that that had been many years ago, but because he had not held anything back from God that night, God had truly blessed him in his life with great wealth. Full of pride, John sat back down. As he was taking his seat, a little old lady was overheard saying, “I dare you to do it again.”

Here was John, thinking that God had rewarded him with great wealth because of a single moment of sacrificial giving when he was a young boy. In his mind, his great wealth and success were intricately connected to one event of surrender. But his thinking, though partly true, was inherently faulty. Undoubtedly, John had been blessed and had many reasons to be thankful. He rightly recognized that God was the source of his success, but John’s ultimate conclusion was based on a simplistic understanding of causation. Causation is complex because a decision is always preceded by an antecedent, which in turn is influenced by a multiplicity of factors. To think there is an equation to get God to bless us or a magical formula that may entail a one-time gift or one-time prayer would be the same error as reducing God to a genie in a bottle. We do not give God X so he may give us back 10X, and neither do we just surrender our lives once and think that God will give us 10X because we gave X. The giving—the consecration, the surrender, the prayer—must be continual, ongoing, perpetual.

This is the mistake that most of us make in prayer. We think that God will reward our prayers with the answers we seek because, well, we prayed or because we prayed a lot! When we don't receive what we have prayed for, we either stop praying altogether, or we think we are not good enough or holy enough or deserving enough like others who did get what they prayed for. But that is not how God works. He does not sit on his glorious throne listening for compelling arguments as to why our wishes should be granted. God sees everything, and we do not. He knows everything, but we do not. This is where trust begins and reason ends. Will we trust that he knows what he is doing when prayer is not answered the way we expected? Will we trust that he has a plan to redeem our pain in the midst of brokenness and tragedy when the last thing we feel like doing is praying? Will we trust that prayer can accomplish much more than receiving answers in the way we think they should be given? There are only two possible answers to these questions. We can either say no and *resist*, or we can say yes and *release*. If we resist, the pain will be double in weight. For God desires to come near, but we turn away from the only true source of blessing who knows just what we need. If we release our fears, doubts, worry, and pain to him, prayer will naturally become a personalized exchange, in which the first blessing received will be the Spirit of God himself.

When teaching about prayer in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:9–11). Against a backdrop of increasingly faithful activity, we set our hearts on prayer, recognizing that the blessings of God’s rewards come in many forms. In fact, answers to prayer are prone to appear wrapped up in a mantle of surprise, packaged in the smallest of boxes, and arriving at the most unpredictable times. Sometimes the blessings come in the form of God’s tender solace. Other times, they appear in the form of a great miracle that no one can explain. Many times the answer is a new perspective. Sometimes the answer is still being forged as we wait silently, impatiently, or trembling in the fiery furnace. And sometimes the answer is no. Regardless of how God’s good gifts come, the truth is that God always answers prayer and rewards what is done in the secret place.

Praying without Ceasing

*Rejoice always, **pray continually**, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

Before delving into a discussion about what it means to pray without ceasing, let’s first talk about what this phrase does not

mean. Praying without ceasing does not mean we stop thinking or playing or working or resting because all we do is pray. To be in constant communion with God does not mean thinking about God to the exclusion of all other things, as if God should be separate from our daily lives. When we compartmentalize activities, separating them into sacred and secular, we allocate God to a transcendent realm and fail to see that God is also immanent—that is, here in the world, permanently pervading and sustaining the entire world. Since God is everywhere and can see everything, even the hidden motives of our hearts, dialoguing with God about how we truly feel is never a surprise to him. Thus, praying without ceasing entails shifting our perspective from ourselves onto God without disregarding ourselves. It involves nurturing the awareness of God’s omniscience and omnipresence as well as recognizing and understanding our own strengths, weaknesses, and how we are individually wired. As we invite God into our lives and discuss with him our thoughts, feelings, concerns, and goals in life, he convicts, guides, leads, transforms, and helps us navigate the storms of life and enjoy the green pastures beside still waters.

In order to pray without ceasing, we must first nurture a suitable mindset. Prayer requires us to develop a mindset conducive to the practice of the presence of God—making room for God in our thoughts. We cannot pray without ceasing if we are consumed by our worries, selfish desires, and daily activi-

ties. But neither can we pray without ceasing if we are unable to invite God to be part of those thoughts and keep nothing hidden from him. We cannot pray without ceasing if we talk all the time and make no space to listen. But the moment we begin to shift our perspective and take our minds off all the jittery noise that weighs us down, we can invite God to help us sort through our intricate thoughts.

It would be almost impossible to empty our minds of all our concerns and problems because these constitute part of our human existence. In fact, in Scripture, we are never called to empty our minds—only our hearts. So it will require discipline on our part to train our thoughts. Our minds are the soil where both joy and sorrow, pain and desire meet. These are natural responses to the experiences of life. We can invite God into the inner chambers of our hearts and ask him to purify, bless, sanctify, or heal us in these areas. As Henri Nouwen has eloquently written, “To pray unceasingly is to channel our thoughts out of their fearful isolation into a fearless conversation with God.”⁷ By shifting our perspective from the problem onto God’s presence, we can avoid spending too much time on introspection, lest we idolize the practice itself or become consumed by our own inadequacies instead of worshiping the God who reveals himself *during* introspection.

7. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 68.

This shift may at times be aided by focusing our attention on images that bring us closer to Christ. For example, in the little prayer chapel at the university where I work, there is a wall painted with several images that convey the suffering of Christ. On one side, there is a picture of a cup and on the other side a picture of fire. In the middle, the words “The Prayer of Faith” are written, and right above these words a dove is surrounded by light. By focusing my attention on this picture and these words, I am reminded that the prayer of faith invites us to embrace the cup of suffering as well as the hopeful, reviving fire of God as two sides of the same coin: faith. The prayer of faith is an invitation to embark on what has already been revealed and experienced by Christ.

Let me share the following illustration to demonstrate a key point when it comes to praying without ceasing. An optimistic farmer lived next to a cranky neighbor. As soon as the farmer woke up each day, he would say, “Good morning, God!”

Next to his farm lived a grouchy old woman whose morning greeting was more like, “Good grief! Morning?!”

The two could not be more opposite. Where he saw opportunity, she saw problems. Where he was content, she was distressed.

One morning the farmer exclaimed, “Look at that gorgeous sunrise!”

“Yeah,” she countered, “It will probably get so hot the crops will scorch!”

During a spring shower, he would say, “Isn’t this wonderful? The rain is giving the corn the drink it needs today!”

“And if it doesn’t stop before too long,” would come the sour answer, “we’ll wish we’d taken out flood insurance!”

Convinced that he could instill a little sense of wonder in her attitude, he got a dog that could perform incredible tricks. One day he invited her to watch his dog do some of its tricks. “Fetch!” he exclaimed, as he tossed a stick out into the lake. The dog rushed after the stick, walked on the water, and retrieved it. “What do you think of that?” he asked, smiling.

“Not much of a dog,” she remarked. “He can’t even swim!”

When we pray, we can be like the farmer, or we can be like the woman. We can look at our circumstances and stress and complain, or we can look at God and recognize he is greater than any situation we may face here on earth and be thankful for one more day of life. When we expose our hearts, reveal our thoughts, and invite God to direct them and redirect us, we nurture a mindset of praying without ceasing. We begin to notice God at work in the everyday aspects of life. We grow to the point of sensing God’s presence in the irreparable, in the weariness of a long night, and in the dead of winter. When we invite a loving God into a candid dialogue about every aspect of life, he is able to reproduce in us his very own life.

Persisting through Obstacles

Praying without ceasing also involves prayer that endures and perseveres, especially when strenuous situations attempt to extinguish our motivation, dampen our fervency, or stifle our faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages his disciples with these words: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7–8). The Greek verbs in verse 7 are imperative, implying a command, an exhortation. But in verse 8, the verbs become participles, implying continual action. This shift means that our asking should not be done only once but must be ongoing. Those who *keep* asking will receive, those who *keep* seeking will find, and those who *keep* knocking will have the door opened to them. Jesus encourages us to pray until we receive an answer, but the command is bracketed in an interesting paradox: we ought to pray as if the answer depends on our prayer while simultaneously trusting that everything already depends on God. We ask as if we do not know whether the door will be opened, but we keep on asking because we know the right one *will* be opened. Within this paradox, we find the best opportunity for perseverance.

When I was a college student, I ran track and cross country. After years of hard work, I qualified to run the marathon

at the national competition during my senior year. In preparation for the race of my life, I trained long hours every day. When the big day finally came, I was ready. The race started slow. After all, we had twenty-six miles in front of us. By mile fifteen, I found myself in second place. For the next five miles, I competed next to another girl who was not going to let me win easily. By mile nineteen, I thought, *I need to get rid of this girl*, so I sped up a little, but so did she. At mile twenty-one, I hit the famous “runner’s wall.” If you are a runner, you know what I’m talking about. It’s not the greatest feeling. It does not matter what you tell your body—it will not respond to your commands. At mile twenty-two, runners were starting to pass me, and by mile twenty-three I could barely move. I had side stitches, my legs were cramping, and I thought about quitting.

But I heard the voice of my coach along the road: “Keep going, don’t give up now, you are almost there!”

So I approached mile twenty-four no longer thinking about quitting. Instead, I was thinking about dying. It seemed much more likely and appealing at the time! But I had only two miles left, so I pushed myself little by little until I saw the finish line, and as soon as I crossed it, I collapsed and passed out. I was so dehydrated I became delirious. My coach thought I was speaking Spanish, but God knows it was actually some sort of angelic tongue preparing me for my eternal home! I did not win that day. But I finished the race, and I can say I ran a marathon.

And so it is with prayer. Sometimes we will feel the rhythms of joy so deeply etched in our memories or hear the beautiful sound of otherworldly music so vividly imprinted in our hearts as we recall or experience a meaningful time of glory. In those times, it will become almost inevitable to want to join a choir of angels. But there will be other times when the deep silence of God, the dark night of the soul, unmet expectations, the disillusion of a prayer that feels unanswered, or the simple interference of fear, doubt, anxiety, and defeat will place great hurdles along our paths for us to overcome. The best way to overcome them is through unceasing prayer, prayer that brings both the beautiful and the ugly, the sorrowful and the joyful, the pleasing and the shameful aspects of life together and offers all of it to the God who sees, receives, responds, and is able to heal and transform. And, as we persist through the many obstacles that will attempt to make us quit the race of faith, we might hear the voice of God along the way: *Keep going, don't give up now, you are almost there!*