

Chapter 1

Simple Prayer

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Pray as you can, not as you can't. —Dom John Chapman

We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness.

We are not quite sure what holds us back. Of course we are busy with work and family obligations, but that is only a smoke screen. Our busyness seldom keeps us from eating or sleeping or making love. No, there is something deeper, more profound keeping us in check. In reality, there are any number of “somethings” preventing us, all of which we will explore in due time. But for now there is one “something” that needs immediate attention. It is the notion—almost universal among us modern high achievers—that we have to have everything “just right” in order to pray. That is, before we can really pray, our lives need some fine tuning, or we need to know more about how to pray, or we need to study the philosophical questions surrounding prayer, or we need to have a better grasp of the great traditions of prayer. And on it goes. It isn't that these are wrong concerns or that there is never a time to deal with them. But we are starting from the wrong end of things—putting the cart before the horse. Our problem is that we assume prayer is something to master the way we master algebra or auto mechanics. That puts us in the “on-top” position, where we are competent and in control. But when praying, we come “underneath,” where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent. “To pray,” writes Emilie Griffin, “means to be willing to be naive.”¹

I used to think that I needed to get all my motives straightened out before I could pray, really pray. I would be in some prayer group, for example, and I would examine what I had just prayed and think to myself, “How utterly foolish and self centered; I can't pray this way!” And so I would determine never to pray again until my motives were pure. You understand, I did not want to be a hypocrite. I knew that God is holy and righteous. I knew that prayer is no magic incantation. I knew that I must not use God for my own ends. But the practical effect of all this internal soul-searching was to completely paralyze my ability to pray.

The truth of the matter is, we all come to prayer with a tangled mass of motives—altruistic and selfish, merciful and hateful, loving and bitter. Frankly, this side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well. And we pray by it.

Jesus reminds us that prayer is a little like children coming to their parents. Our children come to us with the craziest requests at times! Often we are grieved by the meanness and selfishness in their requests, but we would be all the more grieved if they never came to us even with their meanness and selfishness. We are simply glad that they do come—mixed motives and all.

This is precisely how it is with prayer. We will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough, or know enough in order to pray rightly. We simply must set all these things aside and begin praying. In fact, it is in the very act of prayer itself—the intimate, ongoing interaction with God—that these matters are cared for in due time.

Just as We Are

What I am trying to say is that God receives us just as we are and accepts our prayers just as they are. In the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer

a bad prayer. So we are brought to the most basic, the most primary form of prayer: Simple Prayer. Let me describe it for you. In Simple Prayer we bring ourselves before God just as we are, warts and all. Like children before a loving father, we open our hearts and make our requests. We do not try to sort things out, the good from the bad. We simply and unpretentiously share our concerns and make our petitions. We tell God, for example, how frustrated we are with the co-worker at the office or the neighbor down the street. We ask for food, favorable weather, and good health.

In a very real sense we are the focus of Simple Prayer. Our needs, our wants, our concerns dominate our prayer experience. Our prayers are shot through with plenty of pride, conceit, vanity, pretentiousness, haughtiness, and general all around egocentricity. No doubt there are also magnanimity, generosity, unselfishness, and universal goodwill.

We make mistakes—lots of them; we sin; we fall down, often—but each time we get up and begin again. We pray again. We seek to follow God again. And again our insolence and self indulgence defeat us. Never mind. We confess and begin again...and again...and again. In fact, sometimes Simple Prayer is called the "Prayer of Beginning Again."

Simple Prayer is the most common form of prayer in the Bible. There is little that is lofty or magnanimous about the faith heroes who journey across the pages of Scripture. Think of Moses complaining to God about his stiff-necked and erstwhile followers: "Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?'" (Num. 11:1 lb—12). Or consider Elisha retaliating against the children who jeered at him, calling him a "bald head": "He cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys" (2 Kings 2:24). And then there is the Psalmist delighting in the violent death of the babies of his enemies: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (Ps. 137:9).

Yet right in the midst of all this self-serving prayer are some of the most noble and sublime utterances of the human spirit. Think of Moses interceding before God on behalf of a stubborn and disobedient Israel: "But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written" (Exod. 32:32). Or consider this same Elisha who had cursed the children, on another day showing mercy to a barren woman of Shunem and prophesying over her: "At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son" (2 Kings 4:16). Or look into the heart of the Psalmist crying out to Yahweh, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long" (Ps. 119:9 7). In Simple Prayer the good, the bad, and the ugly are all mixed together.

Simple Prayer is found throughout Scripture. Abraham prayed this way, as did Joseph, Joshua, Hannah, David, Gideon, Ruth, Peter, James, John, and a host of other biblical luminaries.

Simple Prayer involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate Father. There is no pretense in Simple Prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and contradictory motives from God—or ourselves. And in this posture we pour out our heart to the God who is greater than our heart and who knows all things (1 John 3:20).

Simple Prayer is beginning prayer. It is the prayer of children, and yet we will return to it again and again. Saint Teresa of Avila notes, "There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn't necessary to return often to the beginning."² Jesus, for example, calls us to Simple Prayer when he urges us to ask for daily bread. As John Dalrymple rightly observes, "We never outgrow this kind of prayer, because we never outgrow the needs which give rise to it."³

There is a temptation, especially by the "sophisticated," to despise this most elementary way of praying. They seek to skip over Simple Prayer in the hopes of advancing to more "mature" expressions of prayer. They smile at the egotistical asking, asking, asking of so many. Grandly they speak of avoiding "self-centered prayer" in favor of "other-centered prayer." What these people fail to see,

however, is that Simple Prayer is necessary, even essential, to the spiritual life. The only way we move beyond "self-centered prayer" (if indeed we ever do) is by going through it, not by making a detour around it.

Those who think they can leap over Simple Prayer deceive themselves. Most likely they themselves have not prayed. They may have discussed prayer, analyzed prayer, even written books about prayer, but it is highly unlikely that they have actually prayed.

But when we pray, genuinely pray, the real condition of our heart is revealed. This is as it should be. This is when God truly begins to work with us. The adventure is just beginning.

Beginning Where We Are

Up to this point we have been describing Simple Prayer. That is theory. But we must move beyond theory to ask the question for which all that has gone before is prelude. How do we practice Simple Prayer? What do we do? Where do we begin?

Very simply we begin right where we are: in our families, on our jobs, with our neighbors and friends. Now, I wish this did not sound so trivial, because, on the practical level of knowing God, it is the most profound truth we will ever hear. To believe that God can reach us and bless us in the ordinary junctures of daily life is the stuff of prayer. But we want to throw this away, so hard is it for us to believe that God would enter our space. "God can't bless me here," we moan. "When I graduate..." "When I'm the chairman of the board..." "When I'm the president of the company. "When I'm the senior pastor... then God can bless me." But you see, the only place God can bless us is right where we are, because that is the only place we are!

Do you remember Moses at the burning bush? God had to tell him to take off his shoes—he did not know he was on holy ground. And if we can just come to see that right where we are is holy ground—in our jobs and homes, with our coworkers and friends and families. This is where we learn to pray.

In the most natural and simple way possible we learn to pray our experiences by taking up the ordinary events of everyday life and giving them to God. Perhaps we have a crushing failure that gives us more than one sleepless night. Well, we pace the floor with God, telling him of our hurt and our pain and our disappointment. "Why me?" we cry out, "why me?" for frustration and tears and anger are also the language of Simple Prayer. We invite God to walk with us as we grieve the loss of our dream. Maybe an offhand remark by a neighbor triggers a whole explosion of emotions within us: anger, jealousy, fear. Very well, we speak frankly and honestly with God about what is happening and ask him to help us see the hurt behind the emotion.

We should feel perfectly free to complain to God, or argue with God, or yell at God. One time the prophet Jeremiah shouted out, "You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger. I am a daily laughing-stock, everybody's butt" (Jer. 20:7 JB). And I can well imagine that Jeremiah shook his fist toward heaven as he spoke!

God is perfectly capable of handling our anger and frustration and disappointment. C. S. Lewis counsels us to "lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."⁴

We must never believe the lie that says that the details of our lives are not the proper content of prayer. For example, we may have been taught that prayer is a sublime and otherworldly activity, that in prayer we are to talk to God about God. As a result, we are inclined to view our experiences as distractions and intrusions into proper prayer. This is an ethereal, decarnate spirituality. We, on the other hand, worship a God who was born in a smelly stable, who walked this earth in blood, sweat, and tears, but who nevertheless lived in perpetual responsiveness to the heavenly Monitor.

And so I urge you: carry on an ongoing conversation with God about the daily stuff of life, a little like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. * For now, do not worry about "proper" praying, just talk to God. Share your hurts, share your sorrows, share your joys—freely and openly. God listens in compassion and love, just like we do when our children come to us. He delights in our presence. When

we do this, we will discover something of inestimable value. We will discover that by praying we learn to pray.

** Tevye's prayers, by the way, appeal to us precisely because they are Simple Prayer. There is no better example of this than his song "If I Were a Rich Man," in which he prays the question many of us wish we could ask the Almighty: "Lord, Who made the lion and the lamb/You decreed I should be what I am./Would it spoil some vast, eternal plan/If I were a wealthy man?"*

Counsels Along the Way

I would like to give a few beginning words of counsel as we start on this studied adventure into prayer. My first counsel is simply a reminder that prayer is nothing more than an ongoing and growing love relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is especially true with Simple Prayer. Here no one has any advantage. The bruised and broken enter Simple Prayer as freely as do the healthy and wealthy. Madame Guyon writes, "This way of prayer, this simple relationship to your Lord, is so suited for everyone; it is just as suited for the dull and the ignorant as it is for the well-educated. This prayer, this experience which begins so simply, has as its end a totally abandoned love to the Lord. Only one thing is required—Love"⁵

Second, as we begin, we must never be discouraged by our lack of prayer. Even in our prayerlessness we can hunger for God. If so, the hunger is itself prayer. "The desire for prayer," writes Mary Clare Vincent, "is prayer, the prayer of desire."⁶ In time the desire will lead to practice, and practice will increase the desire. When we cannot pray, we let God be our prayer. Nor should we be frightened by the hardness of our heart: prayer will soften it. We give even our lack of prayer to God.

An opposite but equally important counsel is to let go of trying too hard to pray. Some people work at the business of praying with such intensity that they get spiritual indigestion. There is a principle of progression in the spiritual life. We do not take occasional joggers and put them in a marathon race, and we must not do that with prayer, either. The desert mothers and fathers spoke of the sin of "spiritual greed," that is, wanting more of God than can properly be digested. If prayer is not a fixed habit with you, instead of starting with twelve hours of prayer-filled dialogue, single out a few moments and put all your energy into them. When you have had enough, tell God simply, "I must have a rest; I have no strength to be with you all the time." This, by the way, is perfectly true, and God knows that you are still not capable of bearing his company continuously. Besides, even the most spiritually advanced—perhaps *especially* the most spiritually advanced—need frequent times of laughter and play and good fun.

I now want to give a counsel that may sound strange. It is that we should learn to pray even while we are dwelling on evil. Perhaps we are waging an interior battle over anger, or lust, or pride, or greed, or ambition. We need not isolate these things from prayer. Instead we talk to God about what is going on inside that we know displeases him. We lift even our disobedience into the arms of the Father; he is strong enough to carry the weight. Sin, to be sure, separates us from God, but trying to hide our sin separates us all the more. "The Lord," writes Emilie Griffin, "loves us—perhaps most of all—when we fail and try again."⁷

Finally, I would suggest that in the beginning it is wise to strive for uneventful prayer experiences.⁸ Divine revelations and ecstasies can overwhelm us and distract us from the real work of prayer. Our approach needs to be more like that of the Psalmist, who sought to avoid "marvels beyond my scope. Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil and quiet like a child in its mother's arms" (Ps. 131:1-2, JB). Besides, if we are unaccustomed to it, just slipping quietly into the presence of God can be so exotic and fresh that it delights us enormously.

The Conversion of the Heart

Simple Prayer is often ignored in many of the books written about prayer. I have often wondered why this is so. Perhaps it is because devout writers fear the self-centered aspects of Simple Prayer. To focus so much on the "self" can easily lead to selfishness and narcissism. Further, we are always in danger of rationalizing and manipulating our experiences so that we hear only what we want to hear. We may in the end become so consumed with ourselves that we lose sight of God altogether and end up worshiping "the creature rather than the Creator," as Paul put it (Rom. 1:25).

It is a legitimate concern. The dangers are all too real. But as Joseph Schmidt notes, "They are dangers on the right road. We must move with some caution but not turn back."⁹ Nor shall we turn back. Seeking divine protection, we venture forward with honesty and openness.

In the beginning we are indeed the subject and the center of our prayers. But in God's time and in God's way a Copernican revolution takes place in our heart. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, there is a shift in our center of gravity. We pass from thinking of God as part of our life to the realization that we are part of his life. Wondrously and mysteriously God moves from the periphery of our prayer experience to the center. A conversion of the heart takes place, a transformation of the spirit. This wonderful work of Divine Grace is the major burden of this book, and it is to this that we must now turn our attention.

Dear Jesus, how desperately I need to learn to pray. And yet when I am honest, I know that I often do not even want to pray.

I am distracted!

I am stubborn!

I am self-centered!

In your mercy, Jesus, bring my "want~er" more in line with my "need-er" so that I can come to want

what I need.

In your name and for your sake, I pray. —Amen.

Chapter 1. Simple Prayer Notes

1. Emilie Griffin, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 5.
2. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976), p. 94.
3. John Dahymple, *Simple Prayer* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), p. 13.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964), p. 22.
5. Madame Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Goleta, CA: Christian Books, 1975), p. 47.
6. Mary Clare Vincent, *The Life of Prayer and the Way to God* (Still River, MS: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), p. 8.
7. Griffin, *Clinging*, p. 10.
8. The value of "uneventful prayer experiences" was suggested to me by Emilie Griffin and is discussed in chapter 1 of *Clinging*.
9. Joseph F. Schmidt, *Praying Our Experiences* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1989), p. 21.