

The Paradox of Prayer in a Time of Pandemic

James F. Kay

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

Praying is basic to Christian discipleship. The Scriptures “urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” (1 Tim 2:1). Jesus even commands us to “pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). The Book of Hebrews invites us to “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16). The Book of Acts describes the earliest Christians as those who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). So it has ever been when Christians gather together: “Let us pray,” and so we do every Sunday, and so we should every day.

Not surprisingly, the onset of the corona virus pandemic has prompted Americans to pray more frequently and more fervently. For the first time since the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, the world has been overtaken by a new “pestilence” of biblical proportions.¹ What is newly experienced by millions today as unprecedented, if only in their living memory, is not that in times of pandemic people continue to die daily. What is experienced as unprecedented is that pandemics dramatically increase that number. Moreover, the interlocking structures of business, commerce, government, and health care, ordinarily taken for granted and sheltering populations from the ravages of epidemics, themselves begin to wobble and even buckle under the pandemic weight of multiplying numbers of the sick and dying which outpace society’s mitigating and alleviating capacities.² Amid the resulting social and political pressures fueling further fear, panic, worry, and anxiety, people may understandably intensify their praying.

In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, some 55 percent of adults reported in the spring of 2020 that they had already prayed the pandemic would end. This figure included “73 percent of Christians and 86 percent of people who ordinarily prayed daily.” What is more, even the “less religious became somewhat more religious; 15 percent of people who seldom or never prayed and 24 percent of those without religious affiliation also prayed for an end to the pandemic.”³ Thus, the practice of prayer incumbent upon all Christians is hardly confined to their ranks especially in times of pandemic.

Nevertheless, if praying is something which the Scriptures call upon Christians to do, it is also something the Scriptures say *we* cannot do: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27). Commenting on this text in his sermon “The Paradox of Prayer,” Paul Tillich writes, “This passage...expresses the experience of a man who knew how to pray and who, because he knew how to pray, said that he did *not* know how to pray.”⁴

I

Our inability to pray on our own without the intercession of God on our behalf points to our “fallenness.” The very thing the Scriptures urge us to do, namely, to pray, and invite us to do “boldly,” can itself become the occasion for what Paul calls the “power of sin” (Rom 3:9). By not acknowledging this power “we only deceive ourselves” (cf. 1 Jn 1:8) about our inability “to pray as we ought.” Ironically, our prayers can thereby become words or opportunities for thanking God for our moral or religious superiority over others (Lk 18:9-14). After all, we are praying! The very power that defies God and refuses to recognize God as our Creator, this power can insidiously worm its way into our words, onto our lips, and into our lives.

The “rhetoric of prayer,” taught since the Middle Ages by learned handbooks and updated for popular consumption by a plethora of today’s self-help books, can, as with quoting the Bible, become more about *us* parading our piety or “spirituality” than about interceding for our neighbors in need or unburdening before God alone about our own needs. In relying upon our own prayerful spirituality and its cultivated habits and comforting routines rather than the Holy Spirit of God, we are not immune from exchanging “the truth about God for a lie and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator” (cf. Rom 1:24).

Religion, its rules, its laws, its practices, and its prayers—however worded or however wordy—cannot defeat “the power of sin.” Why? Because all of our piety, as much as our profanity, can unwittingly, even unwillingly, be taken over by the power of sin that defies the Creator and thereby deifies the creature. Our prayers, no matter how eloquent or how fervent, cannot give us “a clean heart”; they cannot put within us “a new and right spirit” (Ps 51:10). The moral integrity and obedience integral to true communion with our Creator is simply beyond the capacity of our words or our practices to create or sustain. In other words, to live as rectified in the sight of God is simultaneously and paradoxically to acknowledge that we remain unrectified in many respects, until with “the whole creation” we will finally inherit “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21-22). In the meantime, any assuredness that our own thoughts and words are up to the task of truly praying only illustrates that we do not know how to pray at all—book-jacket endorsements notwithstanding.

The power of sin, suffering, and death also reveals the frailty and inadequacy of our words alone. To live in this world is to encounter, sometimes at first hand, such horrendous evils that they simply reduce us to speechlessness. Professor David Fergusson as a young pastor visited a terminally ill parishioner so ravaged by a tumor in her jaw she could not speak. Taking a pad of paper to communicate, she wrote just one word: “Why?” Fergusson recalls, “Though I had received more than a decade of training in philosophy and theology, all I could say to her was ‘I don’t know.’ The only thing that lame answer had going for it was that it was true. She was decent enough to squeeze my hand...and there we remained, both speechless though for different reasons.”⁵

One of my seminary students named Greg once shared the time he and his wife Melanie visited the site of the former Nazi concentration camp near Dachau, Germany. After their visit, they re-boarded their tourist bus, and Greg started chatting about all they had seen. Animated, Greg went on and on. But all Melanie could finally say was “Greg, I can’t talk right now.” After Greg shared this story with me, he ended by saying, “I had been to a museum, but my wife had stood in hell itself.” Sometimes

our words and prayers never make it out of our mouths. They simply stream down our cheeks as tears. “Greg, I can’t talk right now.”

Notice how I have been speaking of the impossibility of praying primarily by regarding prayer as a matter of consciously formulated words. Tillich, however, raises further doubts whether conscious words alone can adequately convey our deepest longings and hopes. True praying would seem to require awareness of something we do not possess as finite creatures, namely, knowledge of “all the unconscious tendencies out of which our conscious words grow.”⁶ If we understand ourselves and others as only consciously rational creatures, we fail to recognize “that the small light of consciousness rises on a large basis of unconscious drives and images.”⁷ If Tillich is correct, it would follow further that even if we do recognize that the source of our drives and images is unconscious, then we still have no conscious way to know or express them completely. So there is no way fully to know ourselves, and therefore, fully to know our real needs, let alone those of others for whom we may make intercession. In short, any claim that we can manage or take charge of a life of prayer could only be true if we were not fallen, frail, and finite. We do not know how to pray as we ought!

II

If our human inability to pray is one side of the paradox that is prayer, how should the other side of the paradox be expressed regarding the activity of God in enabling us to pray? Tillich’s homiletical interpretation of the Pauline paradox of Romans 8 admittedly interprets Paul through the language of psychodynamic theory amid its growing cultural and intellectual currency in the 1950s. In this way, Tillich’s account of the dynamics of divine revelation exchanges the customary images and metaphors of divine transcendence and omniscience. Rather than largely imagining God as seeing or overseeing us “from the heights,” Tillich correlates biblical and psychodynamic language to reimagine God as one who is “searching” us (Ps 139; cf. Rom 8:27) and hearing our cries, our “inward groaning” in “the depths” (Ps 130; cf. Rom 8:23). While “depth” language suggests that our relationship to God is deeply personal, Tillich is not suggesting a symmetrical encounter of parity between two distinct individuals having a one-on-one conversation—even one in depth. That’s why whenever we pray, “We do something humanly impossible. We talk to somebody who is not somebody else, but who is nearer to us than we ourselves are. We address somebody who can never become an object of our address because [that somebody] is always subject, always acting, always creating.”⁸ In other words, God is not just another created someone, an unmoving fixed “object” of our own projection. Rather, God as our Creator is the living Subject in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28a). The reality of the Creator encompasses that of the creature and not vice versa.

Thus, God’s all-encompassing knowledge of us points to how it is that we can pray. God’s knowledge of us is prior to and greater than our knowledge of God. What is more, God’s knowledge of ourselves is prior to and greater than our own. Therefore, our not knowing how to pray even though we are commanded to pray is actually a hopeful paradox and not a hopeless conundrum: “It is God Himself who prays through us, when we pray to Him. God Himself in us: that is what Spirit means....Something in us, which is not we ourselves, intercedes before God for us.”⁹

Prayer can be said to enact faith in the affirmation that God, “who searches our

hearts” (Rom 8:27), knows infinitely more about our needs and motivations, our hopes and our fears, our successes and our failures, and our sin and our weakness than we could ever begin to fathom and articulate. So, we no longer have to think that we must first prepare to pray with the right words or the right disposition in order to gain a hearing from God. No, anticipation of “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21) is the power to pray that is given in the gracious event of prayer itself by the presence of God “in us.” God’s grace elicits and activates our praying so that we can truly and freely pray “in the Spirit,” “in the Lord,” as utterly human partners in communion with God’s own intercessory and transforming work for good on behalf of the world.

If we open the lens on Romans 8 a bit wider, Paul is clear that we are always in a situation that cries out for rescue, redemption, and release from the enslavement and tyranny of the reign of sin and death that brings so much suffering not only to human lives but to the creation itself. With poetic power, the apostle sees the human condition and the destiny of humanity as integral and parallel to that of the “whole creation” itself (v 22). The creation is “waiting” and with “eager longing” (v 19) for God’s final act unveiling redemption. Its “groaning” or “sighing” like a woman in childbirth (v 21) will end with creation sharing “in the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v 21). Likewise, there are also “the sufferings of this present time” (v 18), which come within creation to all humanity, including Christians. So even we “who have the first fruits of the Spirit” also “sigh” or “groan inwardly,” while awaiting “the redemption of our bodies” (v 23). Thus we join “the whole creation” in which we are embedded in awaiting amid these “birth pangs” of God’s final revelation, the glorious freedom of transfigured—not simply resuscitated—life, which is nothing less than “a new creation” (Gal 6:15). Until then, and in relation to our “momentary” bondage to death (2 Cor 4:17), we can only confess our “weakness” when it comes to praying (v 26).

But now, astonishingly, “another” appears in Romans 8 who is “groaning” or “sighing” with us and with the ravaged creation: the Spirit, too, “groans” or “sighs,” and they are “too deep for words,” as the Spirit wordlessly intercedes for us within the dynamics of the divine life (v 26). As Tillich notes, whenever we speak of the “Spirit,” we are saying “God present.”¹⁰ The Spirit is none other than the “Spirit of God” (v 9), which is why “God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, and because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (v 27). The Holy Spirit, who “dwells within us” (v 9), identifies with us in our need and in our weakness. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not exempt us from the sufferings of the world. Rather the presence of the Spirit links us to God’s promised and incontestable final gift of transfigured life that is coming to meet us amid so much distress about us. So, we do not evade the inevitable signs of our impending biological demise, but we can endure them with the Spirit’s gift of patient hope (vv 24–25).

The “sufferings of this present time” surely include the ravages wrought throughout the world by disease and not least by the coronavirus pandemic shaking the foundations of American life. We can agree that “the thing above all which the Church should be doing at the present time is *praying*,” even as we also acknowledge paradoxically that when it comes to prayer, “we are at a loss!”¹¹

We may be at a loss because we have no logically coherent explanation why our

good and loving God permits evil here and now. The late Marilyn McCord Adams, in her influential reflection on *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, reviews attempts by philosophers and theologians to give an adequate account of this perennial problem in classical theism. In her view, it is not logically necessary either to deny there are horrendous evils in trying to preserve the goodness of God or to deny the goodness of God amid undeniably horrendous evils. So, instead of asking “Why does God permit horrendous evils?” she asks, “What does God do to make our existence a good for us in a world where there are horrendous evils?” Here Adams finds in the story of Jesus the God who extends friendship to human beings, a friendship that still brings great good to their lives even amid adversity and evil. This same pattern found in the narratives regarding Jesus, Adams sees repeated in the friendship that was extended to patients suffering from AIDS. Amid this epidemic which began about 1980 and resulted in the social ostracism of its victims by a panicked public, these otherwise abandoned patients were often undeniably accompanied with extraordinary acts of friendship extended to them in extremis by members of the gay community.¹² Such a response does not, of course, prove God’s accompanying friendship in a suffering world, but for faith it is a credible parable of how human beings can embody the pattern of that accompanying presence.

In a similar vein, N. T. Wright notes that the ethical initiatives taken by the followers of Jesus are “the answer, not to the question Why? but to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things *with and through* those who love him.”¹³ Just as the earthly Jesus prayed to the Father at the Last Supper for his own disciples and for those who would follow Jesus in their steps (Jn 17), he continues to do so as the risen Son of God (Rom 8:34). In this way, “we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation and we discover at the same time God the Spirit is groaning within us. *That is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain.*”¹⁴ In this way, God’s work of intercession continues in us and through us. For “the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:13) indeed, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit takes place within both a groaning creation and within the groaning people of God. When we engage in intercessory prayer, we can do so only because the God who is Emmanuel, who is “with us” in Jesus Christ (Mt 1:23; cf. Isa 7:14), remains such as the Holy Spirit sent by the Father at the request of the Son accompanies us today. In this way we participate in the triune God’s mission to accompany a world in pain in bringing about undeniable signs of divine love as we and all creation await in hope the glory of new creation.

III

Embedded in the Pentecost hymn “Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart,” there is a one sentence prayer, “Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.”¹⁵ As we sing those words, we cannot help but think of all the times we have offered or heard pastoral prayers “for the sick, the dispossessed, the war-torn, and the dying,” all arguably “intended to make some positive contribution not only to ourselves but to others, and not merely through our becoming more resolved to support those in need.”¹⁶ So, when those for whom we prayed did not recover or died despite our prayers, such might be taken as examples “of unanswered prayer.” And, ironically, any prayer asking for patience with unanswered prayer might itself, well, go “unanswered.”

Nevertheless, are there any prayers that God does not answer? I think it might be more accurate to say that we may ask for things which God does not grant, so that what we call “unanswered” prayers are really God’s answer to those prayers. If so, we might call this “the paradox of unanswered answered prayer.” Likewise, the answers we sometimes receive for ourselves or for others may be other than the ones for which we asked. Moreover, the non-answers we have received or may ever receive in this life may be ascribed to the difference between our desired timing for immediate divine action and the inscrutable mystery of when God’s promised Kingdom will finally come. True, we may join Garth Brooks in singing our thanks that we did not get that for which we once prayed. On the other hand, lamentably, we or those for whom we prayed may also suffer further or die before receiving the requested healing or wholeness for which we or they did pray.

In either case, this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t ask for what we think and feel either we or others need now. In the presence of God, we do not have to self-censor our prayers before we can pray them. We do not have to repress our desires by biting our tongues with noble Stoic rationality. Rather, “in *everything*” Paul writes, “make your requests known to God” (Phil 4:6). The writers of the psalms often “let loose” with their prayers of lament, complaint, and, yes, even in tones of anger or resentment (Ps 73), and not always sounding ethically admirable! (e.g., Ps 137:8-9). If that is true in the scriptural record of prayer, we can trust that God will take care of nuancing our prayers—and the timing of their answers.¹⁷

Some of Paul’s Corinthian detractors thought otherwise. They thought prayer was all about getting immediately a particular answer: that of elevated, ecstatic existence. And, yes, Paul could match their high-flying spiritual experiences with a few of his own, and he bluntly, perhaps tactlessly(!), tells them so (2 Cor 12:1-6). Paul reminds these “high flyers” that true prayer is not an escape hatch from mundane life, a place where we can look down on others less fervent than ourselves. For Paul took a risk and shared with the Corinthians a time when he found himself brought back down to earth by a tormenting “thorn in the flesh.” Stubbornly, it just wouldn’t go away. We don’t know what that thorn was. It could have been Paul’s pain-wracked body. It could have been his sometimes cantankerous personality. It could have been the Corinthians themselves who were driving him crazy with their criticisms. It could have been the agony of “unanswered prayers.” Who knows? What we do know is that Paul brought this intractable problem to God. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.” But it didn’t. And in this non-answer to his prayer, Paul finally heard an answer from God different from the one he sought: “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor 12:7-9).

The Lord did not remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh. The Lord did not alter the circumstances that were tormenting that preacher. But whatever those circumstances were, the Lord promised Paul that his grace would be sufficient, that the “power of Christ” (2 Cor 12:9) would dwell within him so that he could live *in* the circumstances—whatever they were—but no longer *under the circumstances as if they were God*. This is not wishful, willful magical thinking. This is the admittedly often unexpected, but ever new miracle of God’s grace. That power which breaks in upon us and re-frames impossible situations not as opportunities for ecstatic existence, but as opportunities for “eccentric existence,” to be “on hand” for others as agents of hope because “the Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:5).

Through the event of prayer, we discover again and again, sometimes when we least expect it and when there is little evidence for it, that we *are* sought and found by the One who hears our deepest yearnings and grasps our hand. Even when circumstances do not change, God's promised grace is sufficient for you and for me. Even when we have no idea in advance what enabling patterns grace will take and achieve in our specific circumstances, the promise is that God's grace will be sufficient for us. And because grace is real, our outlooks change, we begin to look up, to look ahead, and not just sidewise at the circumstances otherwise making us bitter or driving us crazy. Amid his "anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:28), grace brought to Paul the promised "peace of God which surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7). With that peace that Paul could not bestow on himself, he was enabled to rise with Christ above the worries of his missionary and pastoral work. And as our precious Lord again takes our hand, the peace of God, the all-sufficient grace of God, reframes our own anxieties. The power of grace puts them into a new framework and gives us a new perspective. We return to live and to work amid difficult circumstances—and to Paul's list of "insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ" (2 Cor 12:10), we could add our current pandemic with all its attendant anxieties. When we bring everything to God in prayer, the promised peace of God quiets our minds so that they do not undo us. Our once anxious hearts, otherwise worn down and worn out, are again lifted up in praise and thanksgiving. With the Psalmist, we can say to the Lord who is near in every miserable, intractable circumstance, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand" (Ps 73:23).

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann rightly cautions against ready transfers to the coronavirus pandemic of biblical responses to "pestilence." Nevertheless, his reflections on how these responses "recontextualized" their historical situation are worthy of attention. See his "Pestilence . . . Mercy? Who Knew?" and "Praying Amid the Virus" in *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 21-27 and 35-45.

2 For anecdotal evidence for how "caste" distinctions in the United States have skewed unequally the allocation and delivery of medical care during the pandemic, see Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), 353-355.

3 Nicholas A. Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown Spark, 2020), 262, citing, "Most Americans Say Coronavirus Outbreak Has Impacted Their Lives," *Pew Research Center*, March 30, 2020.

4 Paul Tillich, "The Paradox of Prayer," *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 135. In using the language of paradox, "God" and "humanity" are viewed dialectically both in their oppositeness and their inter-relatedness but without proceeding to any conceptual synthesis. In approaching prayer dialectically, Tillich's reflections mirror a similar dialectical treatment that Karl Barth gives to the "impossible possibility" of human beings speaking the "Word of God" and that Rudolf Bultmann gives of the "godless" impossibility of speaking "about God," both of which are nonetheless prompted by the human encounter with God. In other words, the paradox of prayer (Tillich), the paradox of preaching (Barth), and the paradox of theologizing (Bultmann) are three aspects of the overall paradox of divine revelation. Thus, in revelation the Creator comes to the creature without obliterating the ontological distinction between them assumed by, and characteristic of, their true communion.

5 David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 338. Such suffering inevitably raises the question of the efficacy of prayer, which Fergusson discusses with theological insight and pastoral wisdom. See esp., 322-330.

6 Tillich, "Paradox of Prayer," 137.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid. See also Sarah Coakley's formulation that "the dialogue of prayer is strictly speaking not a simple communication between an individual and a divine monad, but rather a movement of divine reflexivity, as sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays." *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 112-113.

10 Tillich, "The Paradox of Prayer," 137.

11 N. T. Wright is expressing here the Pauline paradox of prayer in *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 44.

12 See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

13 Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 34-35, where Wright paraphrases Rom 8:28, taking God as the subject of the sentence as in the RSV, NIV, and NEB margin.

14 Ibid., 34-35, 45.

15 *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 326.

16 Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 324.

17 "Man might ask God for anything. The whole of human egoism, the whole of human anxiety, cupidity, desire and passion, or at least the whole of human short-sightedness, unreasonableness, and stupidity, might flow into prayer.... But if God is not uneasy in this regard, we certainly need not be." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Index Volume with Aids for the Preacher*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1970), 307, and commenting on Romans 8:24-30.