

Let Us Pray

**A Study of
Prayer and the
Devotional Life**

A. L. Barry

What a joyful privilege to know that the one who listens to our prayers is the one who forgives us through our Lord Jesus Christ! What a joyful privilege it is for us to know that our Heavenly Father loves us and cares for us as his own dear children. He loves us so much that He wants us to come to him with all our concerns, thoughts, troubles, joys and needs. Therefore, let us pray.



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Additional copies of this book may be purchased from:

Concordia Publishing House
3558 South Jefferson Avenue
St. Louis, Missouri 63118–3968

Telephone: 800-325-3040
Stock number: S 14937

© 1998
The Office of the President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
1333 South Kirkwood Road
St. Louis, Missouri 63122

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Quotations from Luther's Small Catechism are from *Luther's Small Catechism With Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991).

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Introduction

THERE IS A DEEP HUNGER IN THE WORLD TODAY for a meaningful spiritual life. There is a profound spiritual void in many people's lives. We notice it everywhere. People sense that there is more to life than simply moving from one day to the next, living only for the moment and obtaining more possessions. People are hungry for a relationship with their Creator. Sadly, people turn to so many wrong places to seek fulfillment and satisfaction for their deep spiritual hunger. St. Augustine described the only true answer to our hunger for God: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests you." (*The Confessions*, Book I, i).

What an opportunity the church has today! For people hungering, yes, even starving, for a true and meaningful relationship with God, the Christian church reaches out with the absolutely reliable revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The authoritative source of this revelation is the Holy Bible. For people hungering and starving for a real relationship with God, the church holds out the real thing—the truth of the Word of God. This truth reveals our utter and complete dependency on God for life and salvation and it reveals the glorious hope of eternal life that is ours, won for the world by the perfect life and sacrificial death of Christ as the complete and perfect satisfaction for all of our sins. We are able to remain close to our Lord through his Word and Sacraments. As a result of our relationship with God, we are able to speak to our Lord through his gift of prayer.

As I travel across our Synod I often hear the comment that there is a need for our beloved Synod to be much more concerned about prayer and the devotional life, that is, a life of prayer and devotion grounded and rooted in the almighty, Spirit-filled Word. I hope that this little book will help you to pause and take a long, hard, serious look at the state of prayer and the devotional life in our congregations, our families and certainly in your life. Laypersons and church workers alike

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need seriously to consider and reflect on their prayers lives. Hopefully, the thoughts and encouragement in this study will help all of us re-double our commitment to a life of regular prayer and devotion to our Lord's Word.

As we work through this study of prayer and the devotional life we will begin with a review of various truths about prayer that one finds in both the Old and New Testaments of Sacred Scripture. Our anchor for all we do in our prayers and in our devotional lives must flow from Holy Scripture. Moving from an overview of the Scriptures, we will then take a look at what we can learn about prayer from our Lutheran Confessions. From Scripture and Confessions we will move into a survey of insights on prayer and the devotional life that we find in the Early Church fathers. Then we will take a look at insights from Martin Luther and other orthodox Lutheran theologians. The final portion of this book is devoted to a discussion of what Scripture and the church's experience with prayer can teach us and how we can grow and increase in our devotion to the Word and to prayer. As we begin this study, let us pray:

Almighty God, Heavenly Father, you have blessed us in so many ways. The most important blessing of all is the great salvation that you have given to us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. For this and all the other blessings in our lives, we thank and praise you.

More often than we can even recall, we have sinned against you by not praying to you as we ought and as you desire. We ask for your forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ who has taught us to pray.

Trusting in your mercy given to us through Christ our Lord, we come to you in confidence as your own dear children. We ask that you would send your Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we may be ever more faithful in our lives of prayer. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns as true God, now and forever. Amen.

Prayer and the Devotional Life According to Sacred Scripture

IF YOU WERE TO PICK UP YOUR BIBLE TODAY and start reading through it, looking only for those verses that make mention of prayer or conversation with God, I suspect that you would be quite impressed by how many times prayer is mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures. The Scriptures are filled with many examples of prayer and also with many fine statements that help us understand what life in the Word and prayer is all about. Let me cite but a few of these.

Examples of Prayer in the Old Testament

The Old Testament, from the very beginning, establishes the truth that God wants to be in fellowship with his people and very much wants them to be in fellowship with him, in communication with him. We recall how God was in the habit of walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). Before the horrible fall into sin, God and man were in perfect communion with one another, face-to-face, free from the guilt that sin brings. Creator and creature were in perfect union and harmony. There was no need for prayer then for Adam and Eve. They knew their God in a way that we will only know when we have reached our heavenly home. From the Genesis account, it is clear that God very much wants to be close to his people. Not even sin could destroy this longing on God's part. Even in the face of the rebellious behavior of our first parents, God was committed to mankind. God promised that he would send a conqueror over sin, Satan and death, the promised Messiah (Gen. 3:15).

As one moves through the Old Testament Scriptures, the people of God are found turning to their Lord in prayer on every occasion, seeking his help, his wisdom and his mercy. The great patriarchs of the Old Testament were men of devout prayer. Abraham sought the Lord's mercy when he had become entangled in problems caused by his own

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deception. He asked the Lord to grant healing to Abimelech, and the Lord responded favorably (Gen. 20:17). Isaac asked the Lord to permit his wife to conceive and bear children, and the Lord granted his request (Gen. 25:21). The great man of God, Moses, asked the Lord not to send him as a leader to save the people from the Egyptians, but the Lord had other plans (Exod. 4:13). Moses turned constantly to the Lord for divine aid during the long wilderness journey, seeking the Lord's forgiveness when he failed to obey him and constantly asking for the Lord's mercy on the stiff-necked people he was leading: "Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray thee, according to the greatness of thy steadfast love, and according as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now" (Num. 14:19).

Time and again, the leaders of God's people are found in fervent prayer to the Lord, beseeching his aid in moments of trouble. Gideon came to the Lord with unbelief in his promises, but the Lord assured Gideon of his power, peace and presence by answering his prayers (Judges 6:39). Hannah, the mother of Samuel, sought the Lord's favor on her little son, foreshadowing the humble prayer of our Lord's mother, the Virgin Mary. In 1 Sam. 2:1 we read, "My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation." Mighty Samson, after falling into a sinful relationship with Delilah, sought the Lord's blessing on him one final time as he was held prisoner by the Philistines and the Lord gave Samson the strength to destroy the Philistine palace (Judg. 16:28ff).

King David, through whom the Lord provided us with so many of the psalms, was found in prayer frequently. In 2 Sam. 24 we read of David's cry to God for mercy: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray thee, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly" (2 Sam. 24:10). And, of course, we recall the great prayer of Solomon on the occasion of the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. On that wonderful day, Solomon sought the Lord's blessing on this beautiful place of worship. That prayer is recorded for us in 1 Kings 8:22. Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, example after example can be found of times when the people of

God turned to their Lord in prayer. Repeatedly, we see the leaders of the people, the judges, prophets and kings turning to their God in fervent prayer and petition, seeking his guidance and blessing in a wide variety of situations.

The Psalms are a particularly rich source of prayer for the Christian. David and the other psalmists frequently begin by saying, “Answer me when I call, O God of my right! Thou hast given me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer” (Ps. 4:1) and again, “Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth” (Ps. 54:2) and “Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself from my supplication” (Ps. 55:1). One can sense the joy of the psalmist when we read, “The Lord has heard my supplication, the Lord accepts my prayer” (Ps. 6:9) and again, “Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!” (Ps. 66:20).

The Proverbs provide us with important truths concerning prayer. Prayer is not the cause of our relationship with God, but a result. Prayer does not produce faith, it flows from faith. Thus we read, “If one turns his ear away from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9), and “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8).

We have a beautiful account of a powerful answer to prayer with the story of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a king of Israel whose rule of the people was marked by sincere efforts to restore the true faith and worship of God. Hezekiah asked the Lord to extend his life and God answered those prayers by adding fifteen years (Isa. 38:5). God also demonstrates his anger with rebellious people in the Old Testament. We read in the Prophets about times when God turned his face from his people. In Jer. 7:16 we read, “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you.” Later in the same book, God says to Jeremiah “Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you” (Jer. 29:12).

Daniel is one the most powerful examples of persistence in prayer that we have in the Old Testament. He was elevated to a position of

influence and power in the Babylonian king's court, yet wished to remain faithful to the true and only God, the God of Israel. Prayer was an important part of Daniel's devotion to his Lord. It was his practice, three times a day, to kneel in prayer (Dan. 6:10). The king's advisors, jealous of Daniel's position of power, wished to undermine him and so were able to convince the king that he needed to outlaw any prayer that was not directed toward him. They observed Daniel in prayer and reported this activity to the king. The result? Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, but the Lord saved him.

The list of references to prayer that one finds in the Old Testament Scriptures could go on, right through the Minor Prophets. Time and again, we find the people of God turning to their Lord in fervent prayer, seeking his blessing, asking for his forgiveness, and thanking him for his everlasting mercy and forgiveness. Without a doubt, prayer played a dynamic role in the lives of the Old Testament believers and church.

Prayer and the Devotional Life in the New Testament

Prayer in the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ

There is no better model of prayer and the devotional life than that of our own dear Lord Jesus Christ. If you were to go through the four gospels, placing a checkmark in the margin every time you find a reference to prayer—such as when the Lord went apart by himself to pray, encouraged the disciples to pray, told a parable involving prayer, etc.—I believe you would be amazed at the number of checkmarks you would find in the margin of your Bible once you finished. I went through the gospels a few years ago and every time I found a reference to prayer I simply penned the word “prayer” at the top of the page. If you were to look at my Bible, you would see that word on many, many pages. You certainly cannot read through the four gospels without recognizing what an important role prayer played in the earthly life of the Master, in his dealings with others, and in his teaching ministry. Not only did he set a personal example of prayer, but he also actively encouraged others to use the dynamic of prayer in their lives.

Just walking through the Gospel of Luke reveals this to be so. When he was baptized, “he was praying” as heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove (Luke 3:21). We are told that our Lord “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Making time for prayer was a high priority for our Lord. We read that on occasion he would go “out to a mountainside to pray” and would “spend the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). We know that he would pray privately, and often (Luke 9:18). Great events in our Lord’s ministry occurred during times when he was in prayer. For instance the Transfiguration occurred when he went up onto a mountain to pray (Luke 9:28).

Once, when he was praying, his disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Our Lord then gave us the precious gift of the “Our Father”—the Lord’s Prayer—the wonderful prayer to which Christians down through the ages have turned, time and again, as both the outline for their own personal prayers and the model prayer for the entire church. He gave this prayer not merely as a model or pattern, but as a prayer actually to be said. Thus, we read in Luke 11:2, “When you pray, say.” The Lord did not say, “When you pray, say something like this.” No, clearly our Lord intended the prayer he gave to his church to serve not only as a pattern for prayer, but actually to be used regularly.

Our Lord was concerned not only to model prayer in his own life, but to instruct his followers on what true prayer is all about. “When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward “in secret” (Matt. 6:5–6). Even as the Lord in the Old Testament detested artificial displays of piety, so our Lord in the New Testament encourages us to resist the temptation of empty prayer. When confronted with the corruption that had occurred in his Father’s house, our Lord’s anger was displayed at those who had turned the temple in Jerusalem

from a house of prayer into “a den of robbers” (Matt. 21:13). Our Lord encourages us to ask for all things, particularly for the spread of his kingdom: “. . . pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:38). When presented with little children on one occasion, our Lord laid his hands on them and prayed (Matt. 19:13). Surely every parent will take great joy in recognizing that this is his or her special privilege as well. And, of course, we must make special mention here of our Lord’s prayer recorded by John in his gospel, chapter seventeen. This prayer, known as the “High Priestly Prayer” was Jesus’ prayer, not just for his immediate disciples, but also “for those who believe in me through their word.” This was Jesus’ special prayer for each and every one of us who now has been brought to faith in him through the word of the disciples whom God caused to write the Sacred Scriptures. What a powerful example we find in our Lord’s life when it comes to the dynamic of prayer!

Prayer in the the Book of Acts and the Epistles

It certainly comes as no surprise that just as you find prayer to be a primary focus in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, so also it was a central part of life among the first Christians. The book of Acts is filled with repeated examples of the early Christians’ devotion to prayer. Following the Lord’s ascension, the believers were praying together when God sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The early church “continued steadfast in prayer” (Acts 2:42). Peter, John and the other apostles kept the regularly appointed hours of prayer (Acts 3:1). During persecution, the believers were strengthened as they gathered for worship and prayer (Acts 4:24). The apostles recognized that the priority for their ministry had to be devotion to the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4). Before every major decision, they sought the Lord’s blessing through prayer (Acts 6:6). With his dying breath, the very first Christian martyr was praying to the Lord, asking him to forgive his persecutors (Acts 7:59–60), no doubt recalling his Lord’s prayer for the men who had put him to death. The apostles sought the Lord’s blessing on a group of Samaritans, asking that he would send them the gift of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15). Following his conversion, Paul prayed fervently to the Lord (Acts 9:40). Cornelius sought the Lord, asking for his aid and for sound teaching (Acts 10:2, 4, 30–31). While he was praying, the apostle Peter had a vision that led him to the conviction that the Gospel was for all, and he went to Cornelius' house (Acts 10:9). God answered the Christians' prayers by releasing Peter from prison (Acts 12:5). The first record of the sending of missionaries by the church shows us that prayer was an integral part of the sending of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3). Congregational pastors were commissioned with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). It was the custom of Paul and his companions to begin their missionary work in a given town by first gathering where the people were known to pray (Acts 16:13, 16). During their imprisonment Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns (Acts 16:25). When he left the Ephesian elders, Paul prayed with them (Acts 20:36). We are told that on the island of Malta, Paul prayed effectively for the father of Publius (Acts 28:8).

This quick look through the book of Acts makes the point that the first Christians were definitely committed to prayer and the devotional life. Time and again we see how their lives were marked by prayer, in all circumstances and situations. But moving on, let's turn to a few examples in the New Testament Epistles to see what we can learn about the Christians' lives of prayer.

First of all, Rom. 8:26 states, “. . . the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans too deep for words.” What powerful comfort for us to recognize that even in those moments when we feel as though we do not have the words to say, the Holy Spirit knows what we need and will most assuredly assist us in our prayers, making our needs known to God. The apostle Paul constantly urged Christians to be attentive to their prayers. “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). “Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests . . . keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18). We are to “devote ourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2). We are to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Rather than constantly worrying and

fretting about our lives, we are “in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving” to make our requests known to God (Phil. 4:6). In public worship, prayers are to be offered. Paul urged that “requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone” (1 Tim. 2:1). James too encourages Christians to pray when in trouble, to pray when happy, to pray when sick, to confess sins to one another and to pray for one another, citing Elijah as a model of prayer and devotion to the Lord (James 5:13–18). In light of the end of all things, Peter urged Christians to be “clear-minded and self-controlled” so that they could pray (1 Pet. 4:7). In Jude’s letter he too encourages Christians to build themselves up in the most holy faith and to pray (Jude 20). From beginning to end, it is quite obvious that both the Old and New Testament Scriptures hold before our eyes one after another encouragement for us to be a praying people. Repeatedly, the Scriptures are found saying, “Oh, what a power and, oh, what a privilege is yours and mine in this great gift of prayer.”

How Did the First Christians Pray?

Let’s take a closer look at some of the key verses in the New Testament that help us understand exactly how the first Christians prayed.¹ Perhaps the most important verse in Acts to help us understand the very first Christians’ pattern of prayer is Acts 2:42, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” It is very interesting to note the precise use of words in this verse. It says that the first Christians were marked by devotion, first of all, to the apostles’ doctrine and gathering together around that doctrine, then to the breaking of bread, which is Luke’s way of describing the Lord’s Supper, and then to the prayers. “The prayers” refers to a set and orderly pattern of prayer, marked by regularity and frequency. This is an important concept for us to grasp.

The first Christians were devoted to the good teaching of the apostles, to their fellowship in the Faith, to the Lord’s Supper and to a regular pattern of prayer. They based their practices on the Judaism of their day, from which flow subsequent Christian patterns of worship.

We know, for example, that the recitation of the great *Shema* (Hebrew for “hear”) of Judaism was a common practice, done at precise times and in precise ways during the day. The *Shema* is found in Deut. 6:4–9:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These verses clearly establish the fact that God intends for his people to be regular in their prayer and devotional lives. We have a further indication of the sort of order and regular pattern that the Lord wants for his people in order to help them in their lives of prayer in Numbers 15:37–41:

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

These daily patterns of prayer and worship continued in the days of the first Christians. The custom of prayer twice a day was prominent. In the morning and in the evening it was customary for the Christians to recite the regular prayers of the synagogue. Twice-daily prayer became thrice-daily prayer in Rabbinic Judaism, with prayer in the morning, afternoon and in the evening. Therefore, it is interesting to note in Acts 3:1 this commentary on the habit and practice of the

first Christians, “Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” The “ninth hour” was the afternoon time for prayer, about 3:00 p.m. in our time. The documentary evidence available indicates that the early Christians, at least by the end of the second century, had developed the pattern of prayer in the morning, noon, evening and late at night.² This pattern had been developed from Jewish patterns of daily prayer.

Thus the first Christians were in the habit of regular, ordered patterns of prayer. While there is little doubt that they did pray *ex corde* (from the heart), that is, in free-form prayers based on the particular need at hand, it is also clear that the major portion of their prayer was shaped and formed by the use of fixed prayer, what perhaps we today would describe as “formal” or “liturgical” prayer. There is a common misconception that the first Christians were similar in habit and practice to those today who are caught up in Pentecostalism or the Charismatic Movement. The theory goes that the first Christians were a “spirit-filled,” spontaneous, free-wheeling, tongues-speaking, non-liturgical people with no set structures or forms of prayer and worship. This is a misleading view of the first Christians and their lives of prayer and devotion to the Word.

We read in Acts 1:14, “All these with one accord devoted themselves to the prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” Again, we note the use of the definite article, “the” before the word “prayer,” mirrored again in Acts 2:42. In Acts 2:42 the plural is used, “the prayers.” We find the same thought again in Acts 6:4, “But we will devote ourselves to the prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” In Rom. 12:12 we have: “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in the prayer”; and again in Col. 4:2, “Continue steadfastly in the prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” The use of the definite article in each of these verses, particularly when it occurs with the plural “prayers,” indicates that what is being discussed here is not shapeless, formless “prayer” but a regular pattern of prayer, fixed and set prayers, that were said by Christians at set times and in a habitual manner. We also detect the implementation

of ordered times of prayer when we read about Peter praying at the sixth hour in Acts 10:9, indicating perhaps the Christian habit of prayer at noon. Elsewhere in the New Testament we read about prayers at night and day (Luke 18:7; 1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:5).

It is apparent that the first Christians, even as our Lord himself did, followed the regular pattern of times for prayer and worship that common in Judaism, which itself developed from the pattern of prayer and worship fixed by God himself in the Old Testament with the tabernacle and subsequent temple worship and cycle of festivals. Thus we read in Luke 24:35, “They were continually in the temple blessing God” and in Acts 2:46, “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts.” Paul, during his missionary journeys, made it a point to attend synagogue prayer services whenever he arrived in a new town (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1f, 10:17; 18:4, 19; 19:8).³

In addition to all this, Christian habits associated with prayer are also to be found in the New Testament. It would appear that both kneeling and standing were common postures for Christian prayer, although it seems that kneeling was the posture for prayer most frequently known. Luke mentions kneeling often in his writings (Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5) as does Paul in Eph. 3:14; Phil. 2:10).

A Summary of the Scripture’s Teaching Concerning Prayer

Having reviewed many examples of prayer in the Scriptures, it is important that we grasp accurately key truths God would have us learn from his Word about prayer. According to Holy Scripture, prayer is a result of the Christian’s being made right with God through Jesus Christ. Thus we describe prayer as part of the Christian’s sanctification, that is, part of the Christian’s life in Christ. Therefore, prayer always flows from justifying faith — that is, trust in Christ that he is the Savior through whose life and death we have the full and free forgiveness of all of our sins. When God gives us the gift of faith and trust in him, it is then that we are led to want to pray to the true and living God. Prayer is always a fruit of faith, never a cause of faith.

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We need to recognize that God specifically invites us to pray to him. This is an amazing privilege. In Matt. 7:7–8 we read, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” In 1 Thess. 5:16–18 the Lord, through the apostle Paul, again invites and encourages us to come to him in prayer: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Having this gracious invitation from our Lord, we then must understand what prayer is. According to Holy Scripture, prayer is the Christian’s conversation with God. This happens both in words spoken out loud and in the thoughts of our hearts and minds. Ps. 19:14 is a prayer to God, asking his blessing on the words of our mouth and the meditation of our hearts that they may be “pleasing” in the sight of our Lord and Redeemer. 1 Chron. 16:11 assures us that the Lord very much wants us to come to him in prayer: “Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually!” Ps. 50:15 offers equally strong encouragement to us to pray to the Lord: “. . . call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

We learn from Scripture that we are to pray only to the true God, the Holy Triune God who reveals himself to us through his Word. We are never to address our prayers to anyone other than the Triune God, not to idols, the Virgin Mary or any created thing. A dramatic example of the futility of prayer to false gods is found in the narrative of Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. In this account, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to call down from the heavens the favor of their false god. They cut themselves, wailing and ranting for nearly half a day. Then Elijah had water poured on the wood of his sacrifice three times, flooding the altar area with water. He prayed to the Lord, “Let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel.” At the conclusion of his prayer, fire fell from heaven and consumed the entire altar and even the very “dust” that was there. 1 John 5:20–21 asserts: “We are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

The Scriptures also clearly indicate that only prayer offered to God through our Lord Jesus Christ is acceptable to God. Only Christians may expect to be heard when they pray. Jesus clearly says in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.” In the same chapter our Lord says, “I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in My name, and I will do it” (John 14:13–14).

When we pray, our Lord invites us to speak about whatever is on our hearts and minds. When we pray, the Scriptures indicate that we are to bring all of our needs to our good and gracious God, asking for his blessings both in our lives and in the lives of others. When we pray we approach God with full confidence through our Savior Jesus Christ, praying in his name, confident that our Lord will hear us for his sake, with a firm trust that our prayers will be answered. “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matt. 21:22). In James we read, “When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6–7). The Sacred Scriptures indicate that when we pray we should pray in accord with what God wants for us, according to what he has revealed to us in the Scriptures. Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed this way when he said in the garden of Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). We are comforted by the statement in 1 John 5:14, “And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

The Scriptures also describe how God answers prayers. We learn from Holy Scripture that God’s ways are not always our ways, and that He does answer prayer, but in ways that we may not always expect. Isa. 65:24 indicates, “Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear,” and in 2 Cor. 12:8–9, we read of Paul’s wrestling with God in prayer: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more

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gladly about my weaknesses, that Christ's power may rest on me." Many examples in Scripture help us to understand that we are to approach our Lord in prayer, trusting in his mercy, but also aware that He will act according to his will, in accord with his own plan, with a view of what is best for us. Often, I am afraid that this aspect of a dynamic prayer life is not emphasized nearly enough. In his goodness God will often have to say, "No," to our prayers as well as, "Yes." Perhaps the best illustration of this truth is our Lord's parable of the persistent widow. We read in Luke 18:1 that our Lord "told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Our Lord wants us to trust that God will answer our prayers in the way that he knows to be the best.

There are wonderful promises from our Lord associated with prayer. In John 16:23 we read, "In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name." Ps. 91:15 comforts us with the promise that when a Christian prays, God indeed does hear and will respond: "When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him." We are reminded that the Lord who makes promises will carry them out, for "He who promised is faithful." In Isa. 54:10 the Lord lays the foundation for our trust and confidence in him as we approach him in prayer. There we are told, "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you." And of course, the powerful statement in Rom. 8:32 makes us realize that if the Lord of all creation did not even spare his own Son, surely then he will hear our prayers: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" Eph. 3:20 makes us realize that even when we do pray, the Lord who hears is able to do more than we could possibly even think to ask. "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think." We place our confidence in the one who does more for us than we are even aware.

When we pray, the Bible indicates that we are to pray not only for ourselves, but also for others, even including our enemies. Paul urges the same in 1 Tim. 2:1–2 where he writes, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Our Lord, in Matt. 5:44, says, “Pray for those who persecute you.” We read examples of prayers for others when we read of how Abraham prayed for Sodom in Gen. 18:23–32, pleading with the Lord to spare the city from his wrath if there were any righteous people left in it. Our Lord himself, from the cross, prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Finally, the Scriptures assure us that we are privileged to pray to the Lord in any place, and at any time. We wish particularly to pray when we are gathered together with fellow believers in church. Paul gave specific instruction that prayer is to be an important element of public Christian worship. The church gathers for the purpose of prayer, in addition to hearing the Word. Prayer is the church’s response to the Word of God, even as prayer is for each individual Christian his or her response to that same gracious Word. The Scriptures indicate that morning and evening are particularly appropriate times for prayer: “Where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy” (Ps. 65:8). More frequent prayer is indicated in Ps. 119:164 where we read, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.” Paul urges us to pray constantly, “Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:17–18).

Common Misconceptions About Prayer

In light of our review of the Scriptures’ teaching concerning prayer, we need to recognize a number of unfortunate misconceptions about prayer. Here I would like to list several of these and provide biblical responses to each. It is important that we be aware of these incorrect attitudes toward prayer.

First, many feel that prayer is something that starts with us, something that we generate under our own spiritual power. But this is not the case. Ps. 51:15 makes it clear that it is the Lord who opens our lips and who moves us to declare his praise. John 16:24 is our Lord's gracious invitation to us to pray to him. This invitation to pray is the cause of our prayers. In Rom. 8:14–15 we read that it is God's Spirit who moves God's children to pray. Paul says that we receive the Spirit of God who then moves us to cry out, "Abba! Father" — that could well be a reference to the Lord's Prayer, which begins, "Our Father."

Second, another dangerous misunderstanding that exists about prayer is that it is a means of receiving God's forgiveness, or that prayer is a way in which God communicates with us. Reformed theology holds this to be the case, viewing prayer as a sort of "pipeline" of God's blessing. We understand prayer incorrectly if we think that by means of prayer we receive the forgiveness of sins or blessings from God. Prayer is our response to what God has done. Prayer relies not on itself, but totally on the objective work of salvation carried out by Christ our Lord. On the cross our Lord said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Prayer does not achieve or earn God's favor, mercy or blessing. Faith comes only through the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). This is why it is so important for us to couple our prayers with meditation on the Word of God. When we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses," we have the sure and certain confidence that forgiveness is given to us not because we have prayed, but through the promise of God's Word and Sacraments, by which the Holy Spirit answers our prayers for forgiveness. We have to be careful not to adopt a mystical view of prayer that it is some sort of magical formula we can recite to open the floodgates of God's mercy.

Third, many people are of the opinion that prayers that are written out are lifeless prayers and lack meaning. There are some individuals who think that if a pastor reads a prayer at the altar during the worship service, it is not a genuine prayer. There are pious laypeople who think that if they use a set order of prayer, this is not truly spiritual prayer. Here we must avoid extremes. We would not for a moment wish to suggest that spontaneous prayer is not genuine prayer. Of course it

is. As we bring our heart felt needs to God, we will speak whatever is on our heart and mind. On the other hand, how unfortunate it would be for us to neglect the rich treasure-house of prayer that we find in a variety of resources like the hymnal. Our Lord gave us the prayer we Christians need to pray daily, the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer. As we have seen, structured prayer can provide a great freedom for whatever is on our hearts, as we are led to remember things in our prayer that we might otherwise never think to pray for.

An author writing on these things recounted his first experience with a strict prayer routine, using a structured order of daily prayer, similar to our orders of Matins, Morning Prayer, Vespers, and Evening Prayer. Here is how he described it:

How can we go on, day after day, year after year, with the same routines? Does it not all dry up and die? Yes, indeed it does dry up and die, if there is no taproot of life irrigating it. Just as the utter sameness of marriage dries up and dies if love departs, so will any routine. To the libertine accustomed to woman after woman, the man who returns day after day, year after year, to the same spouse, with no variety, appears unfortunate in the extreme. We must ask the man himself how things are. He will tell us that routine is the very diagram of peace and freedom: breakfast, lunch, dinner; dawn, noon-day, twilight; work, play, rest. If we can ever arrange our schedules to follow this pattern, we feel ourselves fortunate. Any Christian who prays daily will tell us that in order for the exercise to become a daily one, he had to find a time for it first of all, and then he had to order that time itself into a more or less unvarying routine. Variety is the last thing he wants here. When variety asserts itself, steadfastness flies.⁴

Fourth, sadly, some Christians believe that prayer is an indication of God's pleasure with us. Some people may tell you that if you just pray hard enough, or long enough, or with a strong enough faith, you will get whatever it is you ask for. This leads people into great spiritual struggle when they do not receive what they pray for, or it may lead them into sinful self-satisfaction and self-righteousness if they believe

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they somehow have “caused” God to answer their prayers. Both attitudes are clearly rejected by our Lord. We are urged to bring all of our needs and wants to God, but always—always—with the understanding that the Lord’s will be done, not our will, but his will. We need to think only of Paul’s experience with his thorn in the flesh to realize that God does not always answer prayer as we would want. He told Paul, “No,” and then assured Paul that his grace was sufficient for his weakness and that he would make it, in spite of the difficulty.

In what we have written so far, we have walked through Scripture, in both Old and New Testament, commenting on examples of prayer and then summarizing the truths we learn from Scripture regarding prayer. We now need to take a look at how prayer is discussed in our Lutheran Confessions and what we can learn from these important statements of our Lutheran faith.

Prayer and the Devotional Life in the Lutheran Confessions

SINCE THE BOOK OF CONCORD IS THE MOST AUTHORITATIVE statement of what we as Lutherans believe, teach and confess, I thought it would be interesting to go back and take a look at what it has to say in connection with the whole subject of prayer. We have often heard that it is important to be “a confessional Lutheran.” What does that mean? A “confessional” Lutheran is one who is determined to be faithful to what his church believes, teaches and *confesses*, that is, publicly believes, teaches and proclaims, because he is convinced that it is the true and faithful interpretation of the Holy Scripture. True Lutherans believe that the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Church’s evangelical confessions are not merely historical relics from the past that have little, if any, impact on the church today. Rather, our view of the confessions is that they are the living voice of the church that speak about what the Sacred Scriptures teach. It is important for Lutherans to be aware of what their confessional documents teach about the subject of prayer. There is much encouragement to be found in the Lutheran Confessions.

As one looks through the Lutheran Confessions, it becomes obvious that there are certain places where prayer is a major point of discussion. For instance, we think of Martin Luther’s extended remarks on the Lord’s Prayer in the Large Catechism. In other places, prayer is mentioned in the context of other discussions. We will first take a look at the briefer comments regarding prayer and then spend time with the more extended commentary on prayer in the confessions.

At the time of the Reformation, the issue of prayer to the saints was a burning topic. During the medieval era there developed an incredibly complicated theory of prayer to the saints. While some theologians attempted to modify some of the more objectionable aspects of the theories associated with prayer to the saints, in the common

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piety of the people, the practice developed that prayer was offered directly to a saint. There was a popular belief at this time that prayer was, in and of itself, an act that could earn spiritual merit for the person offering it. Furthermore, it was felt by many at this time that prayer could be offered to persons who are in heaven, who were believed to be able to bring the prayer to God on behalf of the petitioner. Thus, in the foundational confessional document for the Lutheran Church, the Augsburg Confession, in Article XXI, we read the following:

The Scriptures do not teach us to pray to the saints or seek their help, for the only mediator, propitiation, high priest, and intercessor whom the Scriptures set before us is Christ. He is to be prayed to, and he has promised to hear our prayers. Such worship Christ especially approves, namely, that in all afflictions he be called upon. “If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father,” etc. (1 John 2:1).⁵

One of the clearest statements regarding the folly of prayer to the saints is found in Martin Luther’s *Smalcald Articles*. Luther considers the practice of praying to the saints to be a mark of the Antichrist because “it is in conflict with the first, chief article and undermines knowledge of Christ.”⁶ He says that even if praying to the saints had any scriptural precedent or foundation (which it clearly does not), Christians have a far better person they can pray to—Jesus Christ. He concedes that indeed angels and saints in heaven are praying for us, even as Christ does, but that this does not mean that we should be praying to angels or saints! Nor should we say masses for them and spend huge amounts of time and energy in special festivals for saints and angels. Luther labels all this as “idolatry” since, “Such honor belongs to God alone.”⁷

Another major point of concern, valid today, is that prayer may become viewed as a good work that merits God’s favor. The danger with this view is that in the process, the *only* means by which we receive God’s grace and forgiveness are obscured. If prayer becomes a way to earn God’s grace, then the work of Christ on the cross is no longer the *only* way of salvation. As a result of this attitude toward prayer, the

daily works to which we are called are considered less significant and important than the “special” work of prayer.

Thus we read in Article XXVI of the Augsburg Confession:

Traditions have also obscured the commands of God, for these traditions were exalted far above God’s commands. This also was regarded as Christian life: whoever observed festivals in this way, prayed in this way, fasted in this way, and dressed in this way was said to live a spiritual and Christian life. On the other hand, other necessary good works were considered secular and unspiritual: the works which everybody is obliged to do according to his calling, for example, that a husband should labor to support his wife and children and bring them up in the fear of God, that a wife should bear children and care for them, that a prince and magistrates should govern land and people, etc. Such works, commanded by God, were to be regarded as secular and imperfect, while traditions were to be given the glamorous title of alone being holy and perfect works. Accordingly there was no end or limit to the making of such traditions.⁸

The point here is that prayer had come to be viewed as “holy work,” done by monks—something far superior to the daily duties and responsibilities commanded by God. Even today, we need to be very careful that we do not let our devotion to prayer move us to the point where we believe that huddling together in little prayer groups is somehow a greater spiritual work or more special than being faithful to our various callings from God. There is a very fine line here, but it is one to which we really need to pay attention. For example, if a Christian woman is spending so much time in her prayer group that other areas of life are neglected, this is a definite misunderstanding of prayer. If a Christian husband and father spends so much of his time with a small group that he ends up neglecting his family, then this too is a self-defeating and harmful use of prayer.

Urging a proper view of prayer, the Confessions also say that prayer, when it is done within the context of a living faith in Christ, is a blessing from God and most pleasing to him. If prayer is done to

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merit his grace, this is rejected, but prayer that flows from a confident trust in God is most pleasing to him. Thus we read:

For this is Christian perfection: that we fear God honestly with our whole heart, and yet have sincere confidence, faith, and trust that for Christ's sake we have a gracious, merciful God; that we may and should ask and pray God for those things of which we have need, and confidently expect help from him in every affliction connected with our particular calling and station in life; and that meanwhile we do good works for others and diligently attend to our calling.⁹

Going on, our confessions affirm the truth that prayer is a fruit of faith, not a cause of faith, nor a cause of God's gracious favor toward us. Prayer flows from faith in Christ, not the other way around:

Since faith brings the Holy Spirit and produces a new life in our hearts, it must also produce spiritual impulses in our hearts. . . . After we have been justified and regenerated by faith, therefore, we begin to fear and love God, to pray and expect help from him, to thank and praise him, and to submit to him in our afflictions. Thus we also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses.¹⁰

When we pray we are not to rely on our own worthiness or merit. We recall our Lord's story of the two men in the temple. One man trusted in himself and thus said, "Oh God, I thank you I am not like other sinful men." The penitent man simply said, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." This is the ground of prayer—trust in the mercy of God through Christ our Savior.

Daniel prays (9:18–19), "For we do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake, O my God because thy city and thy people are called by thy name." So Daniel teaches us to take hold of mercy when we pray, that is, to trust the mercy of God and not our merits before him.¹¹

So great a blessing is prayer that when the Lutheran Confessions discuss the nature of what a sacrament is, they comment that if we were to define a sacrament as something that has been commanded by God and that has his promise attached to it, then indeed prayer too would be called a sacrament: “If we should list as sacraments all the things that have God’s command and a promise added to them, then why not prayer, which can most truly be called a sacrament? It has both the command of God and many promises. If it were placed among the sacraments and thus given, so to speak, a more exalted position, this would move men to pray.”¹²

With the Lutheran reformers’ emphasis on abolishing traditions of men that had obscured the Gospel making it clear that by the mere performance of outward spiritual works one does not merit God’s grace, they soon were attacked by their opponents with the accusation that they wanted to get rid of all the traditional worship forms and practices of the church catholic (universal). The Lutherans constantly denied this accusation. They recognized how valuable the good customs of the church were for people. The Lutherans claimed that in fact, in their churches, the customs of the church were observed much better, and with true faith, as opposed to the Roman Catholics who did these things with false understandings. For example, “When they chant the Psalms, it is not to learn or pray but for the sake of the rite, as if this work were an act of worship or at least worth some reward.” On the other hand, in Lutheran churches, “Every Lord’s Day many in our circles use the Lord’s Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn, the people sing, too, in order to learn and to worship.”¹³ And again, we read: “The purpose of observing ceremonies is that men may learn the Scriptures and that those who have been touched by the Word may receive faith and so may also pray. . . . No one has ever written or suggested that men benefit from hearing lessons they do not understand, or from ceremonies that do not teach or admonish, simply *ex opera operato*, by the mere doing or observing. Out with such pharisaic ideas!”¹⁴ The Lutheran Church, unlike other groups, such as Baptist

sects, never threw out the church's historic prayer and liturgy. Luther wanted to discard only that which contradicted or obscured the Gospel. Thus, he did not do away with the universal church's liturgical worship.

In the Confessions' discussion of the invocation of saints, in addition to condemning the practice of praying to saints, the point is made again and again that only prayer offered to Christ out of a sincere trust in his mercy is true Christian prayer: "Such trust in God's promise and Christ's merit must be the basis for prayer."¹⁵ When Christians pray they can be "completely certain that they are heard for Christ's sake and that by his merits they have a gracious Father."¹⁶

Luther's Catechisms and Prayer

We need to highlight two documents in the Lutheran Confessions that, more than the rest, help us to understand key Lutheran insights into prayer. They are Luther's two catechisms, the Small Catechism and the Large Catechism. There is much insight we can gain from these documents, and since they are part of the "norm that is normed" for our church, it is important that all of us, pastors and laity alike, be familiar with the teachings of the catechisms of Luther concerning prayer.

Luther recognized that there were often two common attitudes expressed by Christians in regard to prayer. Some may say, "Why should I pray? Who knows whether God heeds my prayer or cares to hear it? If I do not pray, someone else will." Thus, says Luther, "they fall into the habit of never praying, alleging that since we reject false and hypocritical prayers we teach that there is no duty or need to pray."¹⁷ But there are other reasons Christians may find themselves feeling as though they should not pray. The Christian may say, "I am not holy enough or worthy enough. If I were as godly and holy as Peter or Paul, then I would pray." Luther responds to this by saying, "Away with such thoughts! The very commandment that applied to Paul applies also to me. The Second Commandment is given just as much on my account as on his."¹⁸

These thoughts are based on the faulty notion that prayer is our idea, not God's. Just the opposite is the case, according to Luther.

God does not regard prayer on account of the person, but on account of his Word and obedience accorded it. . . . This is the first and most important point, that all our prayers must be based on obedience to God, regardless of our person, whether we be sinners or saints . . . if God did not intend to answer you, he would not have ordered you to pray and backed it up with such a strict commandment.¹⁹

Some early editions of Luther's Large Catechism contain these words,

As the Second Commandment teaches, to pray is to 'call upon God in every trouble.' It is this that he requires of us, and he does not leave it up to our own choice. . . . This we should take hold of and remember above all things so that we may thereby silence and thrust from us the thoughts that would deter or discourage us from praying, as though it did not matter much whether we pray or not, or as though to pray is commanded to those who are holier or in a better relationship to God than we are.²⁰

God commands us to pray, but there is more. God not only commands us to pray, he makes wonderful promises about who we are in his eyes and how he will hear our prayers. Based on his clear promises, Luther urges us not to consider prayer to be a drab ritual, but a vital blessing from God. Thus he encouraged us to say to God when we pray, "I come to you, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord or in my own worthiness, but because of Your command and Your promises, which cannot fail or mislead me."²¹ The reason we pray is because God has given us the faith to approach him in prayer. Faith precedes prayer: "First the heart by faith gives God the honor that belongs to him and then the lips do so by confessing his name."²² We use God's name in "prayer, praise and thanksgiving." We do so because all of these things flow "from the love and trust created in the image of the First Commandment."²³ Prayers flow from the heart that has been reborn in Christ.

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As we pray, we need constantly to be aware of how active the devil is, trying to tempt us not to pray. The devil, says Luther,

. . . is always lurking around trying to bring us into sin and shame, misery and trouble. He has a very strong distaste for the name of God and cannot stay around long where anyone utters and calls upon God's name from the heart.²⁴

It is clear from the catechisms that Luther considered the Lord's Prayer to be not merely a model of prayer, but the prayer that Christians do need to pray, regularly and faithfully. He considered all other prayers to flow from this one prayer. That is why in the Small Catechism, we notice that Luther does not spend any time discussing the general topic of prayer, but launches immediately into the prayer that Christ himself taught us. Elsewhere, Luther once said that the Lord's Prayer "is certainly the very best prayer that ever came to earth or that anyone could have thought up. Because God the Father composed it through his Son and placed it into his mouth, there is no need for us to doubt that it pleases him immensely."²⁵ In the Large Catechism, Luther said this about the Lord's Prayer:

We should be all the more encouraged and induced to pray by the fact that, in addition to giving us his command and promise, God himself takes the first step by supplying and putting into our mouths the words and pattern for the how and what of our prayer life. He wants us to see how genuinely he is concerned about our needs, so that we may never question whether our prayers please him or are really answered. This gives the Lord's Prayer a great advantage over all other prayers that we ourselves might devise.²⁶

Luther makes it abundantly clear in his two catechisms that prayer flows from the childlike trust we have in God as Father. Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer. "God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their

dear father.”²⁷ This, for Luther, was the foundation for prayer—the trust and faith in God that encourages Christians to speak to him as their heavenly Father.

Having examined what we can learn about prayer from the Lutheran Confessions, it is time now to turn our attention to the wonderful example of prayer and the devotional life that we find throughout the history of the church, starting with the early church.

Prayer and the Devotional Life in the Early Church

JUST AS I FOUND IT INTERESTING TO SEE WHAT the Lutheran Confessions had to say about prayer, I thought it might also be interesting to take a look at various famous leaders in the early church to see what they had to say about prayer. One of the first things we notice when we look at early Christian writings is the continuation of the Old Testament pattern of regular prayer and devotion to the Lord—a pattern that was enhanced and sustained throughout the intertestamental period, a pattern observed by our Lord himself and the first Christians. Thus, we read in the early Christian document, the *Didache*²⁸ (8.3), the instruction that the Lord’s Prayer is to be prayed three times a day. By the second century, it appears from the literature of the period that the Christian church had developed patterns of fixed times and patterns of prayer, taking very seriously the apostolic admonition that Christians should pray, “without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Christian church fathers refer to this verse frequently. Clement of Alexandria²⁹ described the genuinely wise Christian who is characterized by a life of devotion to God that was not restricted to mere outward performance of duty, as was common in pagan temple rituals and worship. Rather, says Clement:

Christians are commanded to reverence and to honor the same one, being persuaded that he is Word, Savior, and Leader, and through him the Father, not on special days, as some other, but doing this continually in our whole life, and in every way. . . . Whence not in a specified place, or selected temple, nor on certain festivals and appointed days, but during the whole life . . . in every place, even if he happens to be alone by himself, and wherever he has any of those who share the same faith, honors God, that is acknowledges his gratitude for the knowledge of the way to live. . . . Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea singing hymns.³⁰

Clement also refers to regular times of prayer, in addition to the more spontaneous moments of prayer. For instance, we read, “We are to rise from our slumbers with the Lord, and retire to sleep with thanksgiving and prayer,” and, “. . . before partaking of sleep it is a sacred duty to give thanks to God, having enjoyed his grace and love, so go straight to sleep.”³¹

Clement underscores the fact that beyond these times of regular prayer, the Christian is marked by constant and regular devotion to prayer and to the Word of God: “His whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers and praises and reading of the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during the night. Through these he unites himself to the divine choir, engaged by continual recollection in everlasting contemplation.”³² In Clement, we have a description of the prayer of Christians in Alexandria. At this time, Christians apparently were in the habit of praying before meals, praying three times a day (morning, noon and evening) and apparently also praying before bed at night. This appears to be the continual practice of Christians from the very earliest days of the church.

Another early church leader, Origen³³ (c. 185–c. 254), like Clement, emphasizes that the entire life of a Christian is to be marked by prayer and devotion to the Lord. He advises that the Christian pursue definite times and patterns of prayer. Thus we read in his treatise *Concerning Prayer* the following:

The man who links together his prayer with deeds of duty and fitting actions with his prayer is the man who prays without ceasing, for the deeds of virtue or the commandments he has fulfilled are taken up as part of his prayer. For only thus can we accept the saying, “pray without ceasing” as being possible, if we can say that the whole life of the Christian is one great integrated prayer. . . . Of such prayer, part of what is usually called “prayer,” ought not to be performed less than three times each day. This is clear from the practice of Daniel who, when great danger threatened him, prayed three times a day. And Peter, going up to the housetop to pray at about the sixth hour, when also he saw the vessel let down from heaven, let down by

four corners, gives an example of the middle of the three times of prayer spoken of by David before him, “In the morning you shall hear my prayer; in the morning I will stand beside you, and will look to you.” The last of the three is indicated in the words, “the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.” But not even the time of night we rightly shall pass without such prayer, for David says, “At midnight I rose to give thanks because of your righteous judgments,” and Paul, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, at midnight together with Silas at Philip prayed and sang hymns unto God, so that the prisoners also heard them.³⁴

The early church father Tertullian³⁵ (c. 160–c. 220) wrote this excellent description of Christians at prayer when he was attempting to help non-Christians understand better the practices and beliefs of the Christian church.

We are a society with a common religious feeling, unity of discipline, a common bond of hope. We meet in gathering and congregation to approach God in prayer. . . . We pray also for emperors, for their ministers and those in authority, for the security of the world, for peace on earth, for postponement of the end. We meet to read the books of God—if anything in the nature of the times bids us look to the future or open our eyes to fact. In any case, with those holy words we feed our faith, we lift up our hope, we confirm our confidence; and no less we reinforce our teaching by inculcation of God’s precepts.³⁶

Tertullian elaborates elsewhere on the habits of Christians in regard to prayer:

The observance from extraneous sources of certain hours also will not be superfluous. I speak of those common ones which mark the intervals of the day, the third, sixth, and ninth, which can be found in Scriptures in established use. The Holy Spirit was first poured out upon the assembled disciples at the third hour. On the day on which Peter experienced the vision of everything common in that vessel, it was at the sixth hour that he had gone to the housetop to pray. He

also, along with John, was going up to the Temple at the ninth hour when he restored the paralytic man to wholeness. Although these are simple statements, without the precept of any observance, yet let it be good enough to establish some presumption which may both enforce a command to pray and as if by a law drag us from business for a while for such duty so that (as we read also was observed by Daniel, evidently from Israel's discipline) we may worship not less than three times a day, being the debtors of three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in addition of course to our obligatory prayers which without any command are due at the coming in of daylight and night."³⁷

Tertullian also provides us with insight into the habit of the early Christians' prayer at meals: "It is fitting for the faithful not to take food without first interposing a prayer: for the refreshment and food of the spirit ought to have priority over that of the flesh, because heavenly things have priority over earthly."³⁸ Apparently, from the sources, we note here that Christians were in the habit of tracing the sign of the cross on themselves to begin their prayers.

Turning to Cyprian³⁹ (d. 258) we again find an interesting account and description of Christian prayer. Cyprian notes rich symbolism in the patterns of prayer that were commonly observed by Christians in his native West Africa at this time:

In the offering of prayer we find that the three children with Daniel, being strong in faith and victors seen in captivity, observed the third, sixth, and ninth hours, in as it were a symbol of the Trinity which in these last times should be revealed. For the progress of the first hour to the third shows the perfected number of the Trinity; likewise from the fourth to the sixth declares another Trinity; and when the period from the seventh to the ninth is complete, the perfect Trinity is numbered through a triad of three hours each. These spaces of hours were long ago fixed upon by the worshippers of God, who observed them as appointed and lawful times for prayer. After events have made it manifest that of old these were types, inasmuch as righteous men thus formerly prayed. For at the third hour the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and fulfilled the gracious promise of the Lord.

Likewise at the sixth hour Peter, going up to the housetop, was instructed as well by the sign as by the voice of God bidding him admit all to the grace of salvation, when he was doubtful previously whether Gentiles ought to be cleansed.

And from the sixth to the ninth hour the Lord, being crucified, washed away our sins in his own blood; and that he might redeem and quicken us, he then perfected his victory by his passion. But for us, dearly beloved brethren, in addition to the hours anciently observed, both the times and the rules of prayers have now increased in number. For we must pray also in the morning, in order that the resurrection of the Lord may be celebrated by morning prayer. . . .

Likewise at sunset and the decline of day we must needs pray again. For since Christ is the true Sun and true Day, there is no hour excepted when Christians ought not constantly and continually to worship God; so that we who are in Christ—that is, in the true Sun and Day—may all day long be instant in entreaties and prayers; and when by the world's law the revolving night, recurring in its alternate changes, succeeds, there can be no loss to us from its nocturnal shades, because to the sons of light it is day even in the night. For when can he be without light who has the Light in his heart? Or when is the sun and the day not his to whom Christ is both Sun and Day? Let us then who are ever in Christ—that is, in the Light—cease not from prayer even by night. Thus the widow Anna without ceasing persevered with constant prayer and watching in being well-pleasing to God; as it is written in the gospel, 'She departed not from the temple, serving with fasting and prayers night and day.'⁴⁰

As one moves on into the third and fourth centuries we find evidence that it had become the custom to gather regularly at the local church for the fixed hours of prayer. We read of this, for example, in one of Chrysostom's⁴¹ (c. 347–407) exhortations to newly baptized Christians:

I urge you to show great zeal by gathering here in church at dawn to make your prayers and confessions to the God of all things, and to thank him for the gifts he has already given. Beseech him to deign to lend you from now on his powerful aid in guarding this treasure; strengthened with this aid, let each one leave the church to take up

his daily tasks, one hastening to work with his hands, another hurrying to his military post, and still another to his post in the government. . . . Each evening we must beg pardon from the Master for all faults.⁴²

Ambrose⁴³ (c. 339–397), writing about the practice of daily prayer, indicated what the custom was in Italy at this time.

In the morning hasten and bring to church the firstfruits of your prayer, and afterwards if secular business calls you, you will be able to say, ‘My eyes anticipated the morning that I might meditate on thy words,’ and you will proceed safely to your affairs. How pleasant it is to begin the day with hymns and canticles, with the Beatitudes which you read in the Gospel. How beneficial it is that the words of Christ should bless you, and while you recite the benedictions of the Lord, you should acquire zeal for some virtue, so that even in yourself you may recognize the merit of the divine benediction.⁴⁴

One of the greatest theological minds of the early church, Augustine,⁴⁵ had many excellent things to say about prayer throughout his many sermons, letters and treatises. Repeatedly in his writings, he struck a theme that Luther too reflects in his Small Catechism, namely, that God does not need our prayers, nor does he need to be reminded by us of anything, but we pray so that we may be found to be in faithful conformity with God’s will for us. One author refers to this phenomenon as “gracious conformation,” namely, that by God’s grace, we will be conformed to his desires for us as we seek him and his will in prayer.⁴⁶ We pray for this when we speak to God.

To illustrate this point we see, for example, that when Augustine explained the verse from Phil. 4:6, “Let your petitions be made known to God” he said, “That saying of the Apostle . . . is not to be taken in the sense that our desires are actually made known to God, who certainly knew them before they were uttered, but that they are made known to us before God through patience.”⁴⁷ For Augustine, prayer is never something that comes from simply the Christian’s own efforts, as if, on his own, a person is able to pray to God. Prayer’s source is

always in God, who draws us to pray to him. Thus Augustine could say:

It is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who not only prays for us, but prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us, as our Priest; he prays in us, as our Head; he is prayed to by us, as our God. Let us therefore recognize in him our words, and his words in us.⁴⁸

Finally, toward the end of the era of the early church, we notice a shift from what had been an emphasis on the habit of the individual Christian to a more institutionalized form of daily prayer. Western monasticism, which developed from Eastern monasticism, adopted the various forms and hours of prayer common within Eastern monasticism. The oldest document ordering a specific monastic life is the *Ordo Monasterii*, also known as *The Rule of St Augustine*. It is believed that the rule comes from one of Augustine's followers in the middle of the fifth century. Here is what it prescribes for the daily office of prayer and readings.

At Matins three psalms are to be said, at Terce [reference to hour of prayer] the first psalm is to be said responsively, then two antiphons, the reading of the concluding prayer, in the same way Sext and None, but at Lucernarium one responsive psalm, four antiphons, then one more responsive psalm, the reading and the concluding prayer. At a convenient time after Lucernarium, all sitting, lessons are read, and after this the customary psalms are recited before sleep. At night prayer in November, December, January and February there are to be twelve antiphons, six psalms, and three readings; in March, April, September and October ten antiphons, five psalms, and three readings; in May, June July and August eight antiphons, four psalms and two readings.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, as all of this took place, monasticism assumed the role of maintaining the order of daily prayer in the church. The idea developed that the monks and nuns who observed the regular hours and specific orders of prayer were performing meritorious works for

the laity who could not be present. Connected with the celebration of the eucharist, there developed the whole process of “endowed” masses and entire chapters of monks and nuns, whose prayers and celebrations of the Lord’s Supper were offered on behalf of those who had paid for their prayers and masses. Abuses of all sorts arose in connection with the monastic orders. Sadly, what once had begun as a way of encouraging Christians to pray at regular times and in an orderly manner was corrupted into a system that actually ended up contradicting the Gospel itself.

It would be a mistake to think that only when the orders of daily prayer became more closely associated with monastic orders did they take on their fixed forms, for this was not the case at all. What happened is that as time went on the emphasis on the duty of every Christian to take responsibility for frequent and regular patterns of prayer was shifted over to those who were able to devote *all* of their time to fixed hours of prayer. Thus as we enter the Medieval era we notice clearly that the locus and focus of prayer in the church moved from the laity to the religious orders of monks and nuns.

The period of the early church demonstrates that, as in the days of the first Christians, prayer was an important and essential element of the Christian life. During the period of decline during the Middle Ages the dynamic of prayer became obscured by false teaching and false understandings about the Gospel. Among the many blessings God showered on the church during the Lutheran Reformation, a renewed understanding of prayer and the devotional life was certainly one of the important benefits of Luther’s recovery of the Gospel. We learn much from the example and insight of Martin Luther, and it is now to the Reformation and Luther’s thoughts on prayer that we turn in this our study of prayer and the devotional life.

Prayer and the Devotional Life in the Thought of Martin Luther

AS IN SO MANY OTHER AREAS OF CHURCH LIFE, the Reformation had a profound impact on prayer and the devotional life. While we certainly are unable to judge the hearts of those who lived in the Medieval era, it is clear from written evidence that the personal piety of countless laypersons in the church consisted of great superstition, with only a very thin veneer of Christian truth. One can readily recognize this fact as one reads how Luther described the condition of Christianity in towns that he had visited during a formal visitation of parishes around Wittenberg:

How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw: the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized, and receive the Holy Sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen.⁵⁰

Before the Reformation, prayer was viewed as a work by which the individual could merit the favor of the saints and thereby gain God's grace. The "doing" of prayer was viewed as an intrinsically meritorious work, in and of itself. Consequently, the object of prayer was more and more obscured. More prayers were offered to the myriad of saints than to Christ, the one and only mediator.

Martin Luther's Experience with Prayer

Martin Luther knew better than most the depth of the corruption that existed in the church in regard to prayer. He spent the formative years of his life caught up in the deceptions of monasticism, believing

that through his monastic vows and practices he was obtaining God's grace and favor. Yet, for Luther, the harder he applied himself to the rigors of the monastic life, the more he doubted his acceptance by God. For Luther prayer was merely a device by which he could gain the favor and blessing of God, through the mere ritualistic recitation of prayers. This was a view he shared in common with many Christians in his day—perhaps also with many Christians in our day as well. When Luther had once again brought the saving Gospel to light in the church, he was able to restore a proper understanding of the nature, basis and purpose of prayer.

For Luther, prayer flowed from a heart that trusts in Christ. Nothing can deter the Christian from prayer when he puts his hope in Christ. Even when we are confronted by the reality of our sinfulness and unworthiness, we pray. Luther described the sort of doubts we sometimes have when we pray and how best to handle this situation:

When the evil foe confronts us with the charge: "You are no Christian; your prayers won't accomplish a thing." No, not on your life. Pay no attention, but say, "I'm in charge here, there's no question about that; and even though I am a wicked sinner, I nonetheless know that my Lord Jesus is not a sinner and wicked, but forever righteous and gracious. Yes, the more sinful and wicked I perceive myself to be, the more passionately and earnestly will I call upon him and let nothing deter me."⁵¹

Luther recognized that when Christians pray, sometimes the answer from God is, "No," or "Wait." But no matter what the response, we are to keep on praying. Luther was so convinced of the promise of God to hear and answer our prayers, that he did not hesitate in one of his writings to deal with this subject and to explain why it is that Christians' prayers are sometimes seemingly not heard, or answered.

When our Lord God puts off answering, we do not let up but firmly trust that he will finally say, "Yes," and even though he does not say it loudly and publicly, still he says it privately in our hearts, until the time comes when we see and experience it in fact, provided that we

don't meanwhile become lazy and lax in prayer and perseverance. We learn this from other examples as well. Joseph cried out in persevering prayer for more than twelve years before God willed to help him. In this case, the longer he waited the worse the situation got; the more he prayed, the worse things became. Christ himself cried out urgently for help and deliverance at the time of his Passion, but God held back.

It is the same for Christians today. They very urgently and repeatedly call upon God and see no improvement, but like Joseph find that the longer and harder they have prayed the worse things have become. If God had answered Joseph sooner and rescued him, then no doubt Jacob, his father, would have been happy but Joseph would have remained a shepherd. But because God's answer was long delayed, he became ruler over Egypt and the greatest among his brethren; and God through him accomplished much good both in the secular realm as well as in the church.

This is also the manner of God's dealing with us. For a long time he denies our petition and the answer always is "no"; but if we hold fast to the "Yes," it will finally be "Yes" and no longer "No." For his Word does not lie: "Whatsoever you ask the Father in my name, he will give to you." Because the Word is true, his promise will not fail.

But our mind is greatly agitated by such delay and we would much rather that God would answer without delay. But we must not become aggravated. We must let our Lord God say "No" as he holds up our petition for a year, two years, three, or even longer, being on guard lest our hope and faith be wrenched from our hearts. We will in the end find that God will do far more for us than we asked.

Our Lord God thus wishes to teach us that it is not always good to be heard immediately. In urgent need his answer is there, as for example, should we fall in the water, or be involved in warfare; the answer will not long be delayed. The same is true for great, difficult spiritual trials. But where the waiting and delay can be endured, we should learn that he usually holds back for our own good.

We cry out woefully but he does not hear us, acts as though he doesn't know us, and lets us go on in our misery as though we had no God. But it won't go on like this forever; God will requite us. Let us, therefore, never doubt that we have a "Yes" in heaven, imbedded in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, and his Father's, and that in his time it will be revealed. Now he builds four or five iron walls in front

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of it, and the devil shoots off his futile “No” too. But we must learn to say, I will cling to the “Yes” that God will be merciful to his church and rescue all those who cry to him for help. The “Yes” is deep in his heart, in keeping with Christ’s promise: “And whatsoever you shall ask in my name, I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son . . . therefore we must not despise the Word, but cling firmly to its promise, never doubting that our prayer will be heard, even though for a time God delays.”⁵²

As you read through the writings of Luther, you do not need to look twice to see that Luther was a devoted man of prayer. Therefore, we are not surprised to read the following comments concerning prayer in one of Luther’s sermon on John 16:23–30:

Next to preaching the Word, the greatest devotion Christians can render to God is to pray. . . . When a Christian is experiencing sorrow and tribulation, peril and trial, the only comfort and help he has is to resort to prayer, to cry to the Lord. The Lord here teaches his disciples—and us as well—that in times of grief they are not to forget this, entreating them earnestly to be bold and fearless in prayer. He tells them: “I shall not pray to the Father on your behalf, even though I have already prayed, and am still praying, and will pray for you on the cross and at God’s right hand. There I will intercede for you without ceasing; but the fact is, you do not need me to pray on your behalf, since you yourselves have access to the Father.

For, because you love me and believe in me, the Father also loves you, and he hears your prayers for my sake. For this reason you may come boldly before the Father and pray with confidence, never doubting, for your prayers are heard.” It is, indeed, a winsome invitation to prayer as our dear Lord says, “Whoever loves me can be certain that my Father also loves him, and loves him so much that he certainly will hear his prayer. One of the fruits of my death is that you may pray just as I pray.”

We should be delighted to note that by his death and departure from this world, Christ thus made it possible for us to have access to the Father, whether we be in church or at home, in the cellar or in the kitchen, in the field or at our place of work. In all confidence we can approach him and say, “Dear God and Father, I know for a cer-

tainty that you love me, because I love your Son and my Redeemer, Jesus Christ; it is in such assurance and trust that I now wish to pray to you. You will hear my prayer and grant my petition, not because I am so holy or righteous but for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. In his name I now come before you and pray with confidence that you will hear all my petitions in my necessity, never doubting that my prayer is heard, regardless of my unworthiness.”⁵³

For Luther the Christian’s life is to be a life of prayer. He was convinced that the Lord’s Prayer was the best and most complete prayer possible for the Christian. We are always in need of prayer. For that reason Luther wrote:

Yes, there are causes aplenty to convince us of the importance of prayer. Whoever is unable to discern all such needs should simply make good use of the Lord’s Prayer. It has seven petitions, which comprehend all the things for which we ought to pray. . . . Everything that might trouble and concern us, or, on the contrary, might serve to our good, is well comprehended in the Lord’s Prayer. Accordingly, it is of the essence that we devote ourselves to prayer, for the Lord will hear our prayer. The command is already there that we are to pray, and the promise, too, that he will hear our prayer. Moreover, our dear Lord Christ has provided the format expressing our petitions most excellently in the Lord’s Prayer.⁵⁴

Through prayer, according to Luther, every Christian is like a soldier doing battle. All Christians are to pray, and both preachers and laypersons each have their own special roles to fill as we struggle against the devil who would prevent the spread of the Word of God.

Therefore, let us continue and be persistent in prayer. We, to whom the Word has been entrusted, especially we who are in the ministry, should aid in preserving the Christian church by preaching pure and wholesome doctrine; and every Christian should likewise help by his prayers. Everyone who loves the church and the Gospel, and is concerned about their well-being, ought to remember that he must help sustain them. We can do this best of all through prayer, praying that

the name of our God in heaven be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done; on the other hand, that the name of the devil be reviled, his kingdom overthrown, and his will and designs repulsed. When you do this, then you and every Christian are like warriors on the field of battle with weapons drawn, helping to guard and protect the Christian church against the devil and the world. For every Christian is a soldier who is engaged in battle with the devil.

As firmly as other pastors and I do battle through our preaching and teaching, so firmly ought you contend with us by prayer. This is how we must contend and fight at every turn; for we Christians are mighty warriors, some of us preaching, and you also by praying. These two things, diligently preaching and earnestly praying, pierce the devil's heart. If he is to be defeated and overthrown, it must be done by these two weapons. For the one who rules in heaven does not lie. . . . Therefore, do not make light of prayer, even though you might think that you are not fit or worthy to pray. Were that the case, no one would be in a position to pray. May each Christian say to himself: "Since prayer is so pleasing to God and so highly essential and beneficial for me and for the church, I shall attend church and pray as fervently as in me lies, for I am confident that prayer is not, nor can ever be, in vain."⁵⁵

Luther's Instruction on Prayer

Obviously, were one to comb through all of the writings of Luther, much more could be learned about prayer and about Luther's attitude toward prayer. Perhaps the most famous commentary on prayer that we find in the works of Luther is a treatise that Luther wrote for his barber, Peter Beskendorf. Apparently, during one of their conversations, Peter asked Dr. Luther for some practical advice in regard to prayer. Luther wrote a 34-page book and dedicated it to "a good friend . . . for Peter, the master barber."⁵⁶ Luther here provides us with an excellent pattern of prayer that is grounded in, and founded upon, the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. In the paragraphs that follow, we will be using quotes from this book to illustrate Luther's wisdom in regard to prayer and the devotional life.

Luther recognized that at times in his own life there were distractions that took his mind off prayer, leaving him with the feeling that

he had become “cold and joyless in prayer.”⁵⁷ When these occasions arose, he said he would take his collection of the Psalms and go to his room, or if it was possible, attend a service at the church. He then would repeat, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, a psalm or two, and some other words of the Scripture. He says this is what “a child might do.”⁵⁸ It is perhaps to our shame that we must recognize that even adults do not do this. Instead, we have been too influenced by certain groups who do not have a high view of the Word of God as a means by which God gives his grace to us. We are tempted to view prayer as some sort of “other-worldly” experience, more of an emotional encounter with God, rather than a communication with God based on his Word, in fact a response to our Lord, who speaks to us through his Word. For Luther, prayer was always grounded in the concrete text of Holy Scripture.

Luther states that prayer should be the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night for the Christian. He recognized that it was all too easy to say to oneself, “Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that.”⁵⁹ By means of such thoughts, Christians are far too easily pulled away from prayer for that day. While it is certainly true that the Christian is in constant communion with God through faith in Christ, Luther was concerned that Christian people develop a regular and faithful habit of prayer, a structured and ordered life of prayer, grounded in the Word.

Thus, Luther suggests that after we have reviewed the “basics” of the faith—the Ten Commandments and the Creed—we kneel or stand with folded hands and pray something like this:

O Heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward thee or to pray. But because thou hast commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ hast taught us both how and what to pray, I come to thee in obedience to thy word, trusting in thy gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all thy saints and Christians on earth as he has taught us: Our Father who art, etc. through the whole prayer, word for word.⁶⁰

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Luther then suggests that as we say the Lord's Prayer we repeat it again, petition by petition and use each petition to provide the basis for further prayer. For example, when we say, "Thy kingdom come" we can then, on the basis of our Lord's Word, say:

Convert those who are still to become children and members of thy kingdom so that they with us and we with them may serve thee in thy kingdom in true faith and unfeigned love and that from thy kingdom which has begun, we may enter into thy eternal kingdom.⁶¹

Luther moves through the Lord's Prayer suggesting how one is able to pray a prayer based on each of the various petitions. At the end, Luther explains how important the "Amen" is:

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say "yes" to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, "Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth." That is what Amen means.⁶²

Luther is sure to tell Peter that he does not expect him to repeat every word he has suggested, based on the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Luther is just trying to show Peter how one can pray. Luther was always concerned that our prayers not become empty, ritualistic recitations, or as he put it:

. . . idle chatter and prattle. . . rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the Lord's Prayer. These thoughts may be expressed, if your heart is rightly warmed and inclined toward prayer, in many different ways and with more words or fewer.⁶³

For Luther the point of using the Lord's Prayer, was that this was the text given to us by the Holy Spirit, and through his powerful Word, we are led to many different kinds of prayers. The discipline of using the Lord's Prayer as the framework for our prayer is something that Luther strongly encourages. He explains it in terms Peter could better understand:

A good and attentive barber keeps his thoughts, attention, and eyes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else he is likely to cut his customer's mouth, nose, or even his throat. Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members. . . . How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!⁶⁴

We must understand that while Luther was strongly opposed to praying the Lord's Prayer without thought, he certainly did not advocate moving away from praying it. To prove this point conclusively, one need only notice that in Luther's Small Catechism, his instructions on daily prayer recommend that the Lord's Prayer be said at least eight times every single day—in the morning, in the evening and before and after each meal! Luther understood that both memorized prayer, like the Lord's Prayer, and more spontaneous prayer, was needed in the Christian's life of prayer and would flow from meditating on the Word of God.

Luther suggests a specific devotional method for reading the Ten Commandments, or for that matter, any portion of Holy Scripture. He suggests taking each commandment and dividing it into four parts, "thereby fashioning a garland of four strands."⁶⁵ Then look at each commandment as instruction and consider "what God demands of me so earnestly"; then, a thanksgiving, third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer.⁶⁶ He provides an example with the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me."

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Here I earnestly consider that God expects and teaches me to trust him sincerely in all things and that it is his most earnest purpose to be my God. I must think of him in this way at the risk of losing eternal salvation. My heart must not build upon anything else or trust in any other thing, be it wealth, prestige, wisdom, might, piety, or anything else.

Second, I give thanks for his infinite compassion by which he has come to me in such a fatherly way, and unasked, unbidden, and unmerited, has offered to be my God, to care for me, and to be my comfort, guardian, help, and strength in every time of need. We poor mortals have sought so many gods and would have to seek them still if he did not enable us to hear him openly tell us in our own language that he intends to be our God. How could we ever—in all eternity—thank him enough!

Third, I confess and acknowledge my great sin and ingratitude for having so shamefully despised such sublime teachings and such a precious gift throughout my whole life, and for having fearfully provoked his wrath by countless acts of idolatry. I repent of these and ask for his grace. Fourth, I pray and say: “O my God and Lord, help me by thy grace to learn and to live by them [the commandments] in sincere confidence. Preserve my heart so that I shall never again become forgetful and ungrateful, that I may never seek after other gods or other consolation on earth or in any creature, but cling truly and solely to thee, my only God. Amen, dear Lord God and Father. Amen.”⁶⁷

Luther provides an excellent model of Christian devotion to the Word of God and prayer. Luther advises that we not try to do too much, nor is there any reason for a good prayer to become long and drawn out. Better, says Luther, that our prayers be frequent and sincere than long and tiring. He advises that all of Holy Scripture be used in a similar fashion. “With practice, one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart.”⁶⁸ It is important to note that for Luther there was no distinction between formal and disciplined prayer and pious and genuine prayer. Luther encouraged people to make use of the very words God has given us—the Lord’s

Prayer and the Ten Commandments, or for that matter, any portion of his almighty, Spirit-filled Word. With God's Word, Christians have an excellent foundation for prayer. Luther suggests that the Apostles' Creed also serves as a fantastic resource for prayer, using the fourfold pattern suggested for each of the commandments.

Thus Luther wishes to help his friend Peter have a firm foundation for his life of prayer and devotion to God. That foundation is to be not simply Peter's pious speculations or wishes, but always and only the revealed Word of God. This is the best and most important foundation of prayer for the Christian.

Certainly we could find much more in the writings of Luther on prayer, but we have clearly seen how important prayer and the devotional life was for Martin Luther. He was committed to regular and faithful prayer based on devotion to the Word of God. He remains a good model for us today.

Prayer and the Devotional Life in the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy

WHILE IT WOULD BE EASY FOR US IMMEDIATELY to proceed from this point into a discussion of practical suggestions for our prayer lives today, I believe there is one more area we need to touch on briefly in our survey of prayer in the history of the church—the age of Lutheran orthodoxy. I believe there is much we can learn from these learned and pious teachers of our Lutheran Church.

After Luther's death in 1546, other important teachers carried on his work of restoring, preserving and proclaiming the Gospel. Many excellent Lutheran theologians carried forward Reformation theology in the 16th and 17th centuries. This time is referred to as the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. A popular misconception about the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy is that spiritual life was dead. This accusation is made by those who disagreed with the strong doctrinal emphasis during this time period. It is popular among those who find an insistence on doctrine and insistence on doctrinal faithfulness distasteful. They portray the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians as dry, stuffy, cold persons for whom Christianity was more a matter of "doctrinal trivia pursuit" than a living and active faith. But as is usually the case with generalizations, these assumptions are without merit when one examines the evidence.

The early Lutherans were marked by intense commitment to the Lutheran Reformation because they were convinced that through the Reformation the Lord of the Church had restored the true and eternal Gospel of Jesus Christ. They believed strongly that faithfulness to the Lord meant faithfulness to his Word and so they spent a great deal of time explaining and stating what those teachings actually were. From the multi-volume series of books that were written on doctrine, one may perhaps understandably reach the conclusion that these Lutheran

teachers were interested *only* in pure doctrine. One who reads these orthodox fathers will quickly note that their writings have a devotional quality—a passion and zeal for the truth of the Word of God—that is noticeably absent in the work of many contemporary theologians, and sadly, lacking at times even among some theologians who are Lutheran. Sometimes, today’s theology is written in such a way that it appears to be merely another dry, academic subject of interest only to a select group of “specialists.” The zeal for the Lord’s Word and the truth of that Word that marked the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians is sadly lacking in much of what passes for “theological scholarship” today.

Martin Chemnitz, known as the “Second Martin” for his important role in preserving and expanding the work of Martin Luther, devoted a section of his book for the instruction of pastors to the subject of prayer. Here we find a heartwarming definition of prayer:

[Prayer is] when we pour out our heart before God, and, coming thus to the throne of grace, address, with filial submission and true devotion of heart, God our Father, who is present and hears and, both stirred up by his command and relying on his promise, we set before him our troubles and desires, in true faith, through and for the sake of Christ seeking mercy, grace, and help in the things that belong to his glory and are necessary, useful, and salutary for us or give him thanks for blessings received and praise and glorify his name.⁶⁹

Chemnitz made it a point to advise Lutherans to stick to the Lord’s Prayer as their model prayer; not only as model, but a prayer actually to be prayed continually throughout life: “For that formula, prescribed for us by Christ himself, ought properly to be the standard and rule of any and all other prayers, surely the best and most perfect of all. For Christ does not say in vain: When you pray, say, ‘Our Father,’ etc.”⁷⁰ He also includes the following very good advice for those times when we do not have a strong desire to pray. When those times in our prayer lives come, Chemnitz suggests nine points to consider.

Since nearly all of us are by nature cold and slow to pray, it is very helpful and necessary to know such reasons and have them ready at hand; when we consider and meditate on them, the Holy Spirit kindles zeal for prayer in us.

1. Since it is the will and command of God that we pray . . . neglecting and ceasing to pray is no light sin.

2. The great and manifold need by which we are burdened in this penitentiary of the world, and which we cannot sufficiently understand or comprehend by thinking, must guard against or avert by our effort, should properly move us to pray even all by itself.

3. Also the boundless benefit and very abundant fruit of devout prayers should invite us. For spiritual good things are not obtained from God except by prayers (Luke 11:13). And temporal things are not good for us, unless they are sanctified by prayer (1 Tim. 4:4–5). So also James describes at length the effect of devout prayer (James 5:15–18).

4. Very sweet divine promises draw and incite us, namely, that God the Father embraces us with such great love in Christ his Son, that he regards it as pleasing and acceptable if we approach and address him with our prayers, and he has promised to incline his ears and hear us.

5. Likewise, that our Mediator, Christ, has bound himself with the firm promise that he would be present when we pray (Matt. 18:20) and as our Advocate and High Priest himself bring our supplications to the Father, and intercede for us, and ask the Father together with us.

6. Also that the Holy Spirit of God, as the Spirit of prayer, would kindle zeal for prayer, and devotion, in us, so that we cry in him: “Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6). Indeed, he intercedes for us with unutterable sighs (Rom. 8:26). They therefore sorely grieve the Spirit of prayer for whom prayers are not a matter for concern or for the heart.

7. Since prayer is common to all members of Christ, who call upon our Father in heaven, whom we therefore call “our” Father, he that does not pray, thereby severs and separates himself from Christ the head and from the members of his body, which is the church, or communion of saints. And God himself regards and holds those as Gentiles, who do not call upon his name (Ps. 79:6; Jer. 10:25).

8. Since the practice of prayer is truly a training for all piety and

a most useful exercise of all Christianity, e.g., of repentance, faith, patience, comfort, hope, etc. For the Holy Spirit nourishes, preserves, and increases these gifts in us through persistence in prayer, just as, on the other hand, by ceasing them [i.e., prayers] those gifts are gradually diminished and finally disappear altogether.

9. Where the exercise of prayer grows cold and is neglected, there the door and windows are open to the devil for all kinds of temptations (Matt. 26:41; Luke 22:40).⁷¹

David Chytraeus, one of the authors of the Formula of Concord and an influential student of Scripture, in his book *Concerning the Study of Theology* set forth ten important principles for the study of theology. What was his number one principle? Prayer.

It must always be kept in mind that without God nothing can be learned in theology. When we consider that heathen have never progressed in theology and when we consider that our own congenital weakness prevents us from understanding spiritual things, we must surely commend all our studies to God. For we are not working with a philosophy but with something far greater and deeper, the hidden and divine wisdom, which even the angels cannot comprehend.

We must not fall into the pitfalls into which even the greatest minds have fallen. We must recognize that we could not retain our faith, to say nothing of working in theology, if the Spirit of God did not enlighten our hearts and impress on our minds the true meaning of Scripture and Christian doctrine. And we who so often become apathetic and lazy must not assume that such sincere prayer is easy.⁷²

Abraham Calov was known as a fierce defender of the faith. He was also known to be a man marked by intense devotion to the Word of God and to prayer. In his work on the theological task, *Isagoges Theologicae*, Calov spent a great deal of time discussing how a student of Scripture must approach his task. Here is what Calov said about prayer:

Prayer is the military rear guard for the one who prays, his sacrifice to God, his scourge of the devil. Prayer showers on us the treasures

our faith beholds lying hidden in the Gospel. Just as Moses after entering the tabernacle returned with a divine response, the students of theology approach God with their prayers so that they might understand his utterances. Through prayers wisdom from heaven is imparted to us and flourishes (Prov. 2:3; James 1:5), and we lay hold of the true goal of this wisdom and whatever we could in any way desire (John 16:24).⁷³

So convinced was Calov of the primacy of prayer in the study of the Scriptures that he said, “He who prays diligently has by his praying completed half of his studies.”⁷⁴

Prayer must be sincere. It must be offered from a humble and contrite heart, in a spirit of constant penitence, asking only that God would be glorified in our lives. Prayer is anchored in the mercy of Christ and his saving work for us. Calov insisted that the student of Scripture must set aside regular time for prayer, and be in constant prayer to God asking for his divine blessing on the study of his Word.

Another great Lutheran orthodox teacher, John Gerhard, not only wrote massive theological works, but also devotional works. Among these we need to mention here *Daily Exercise of Piety* and *Sacred Meditations*.⁷⁵ Both of these works, from the pen of the master Lutheran orthodox dogmatician, demonstrate that the orthodox Lutheran theologians were men of great piety and deep spirituality, while also being astute and capable theologians. Lutheran orthodoxy and Lutheran piety always go hand-in-glove. It is important to see how this was so in the life of John Gerhard, perhaps the most famous of all Lutheran orthodox dogmaticians from the seventeenth century.

Sacred Meditations was written by Gerhard while he was still a younger man, before he wrote his *magnum opus*, his *Loci Theologici*. As the title implies, *Sacred Meditations* is a collection of devotional meditations on various theological topics or themes. It begins with the topic “True Confession of Sin” and concludes with a meditation on “The Resurrection of the Godly.” Gerhard includes a meditation on the topic of prayer. Perhaps we would do well here to quote from this meditation, for then we shall have a taste of *Sacred Meditations*.

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Prayer is a faithful messenger we send to the throne of God, to call him to our aid in the time of need. This messenger is never frustrated in his embassy, for God always hears us when we pray, if not according to our desires, yet according to our profit and salvation. We may without doubt or hesitation hope for one of two things; either that God will give us just what we ask for, or that he will grant us that which he knows is more profitable for us. God, unasked, has given us the most excellent gift he had to bestow, even his own Son; what then will he not give us when we supplicate his throne?⁷⁶

Each of the meditations concludes with a fervent prayer, touching upon the topic covered. Gerhard thus models a rich life in the Word, a life marked by prayer and devotion to that Word.

In his book *The Daily Exercise of Piety*, Gerhard wanted to provide a collection of prayers to help Christians grow and mature in their prayer lives. He organized the prayers in the book under five major categories: (1) prayers on account of our sins, (2) prayers of thanksgiving for God's blessings, (3) prayers of request based on our needs, (4) asking for God's help in overcoming temptation, and finally, (5) prayers for the needs of our neighbors. Anyone who assumes the orthodox Lutherans were spiritually lifeless and stuffy, need only consider the following prayer of thanksgiving for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

How great the thanks I owe to you, highest God, that in the most sacred mystery of the Supper, you feed me with the body and blood of your Son! What in heaven or on earth is more precious and excellent than this divine body, personally united with your Son? Where is there a more certain testimony and pledge of your grace than the precious blood of your Son, poured out for my sins on the altar of the cross? This, the very price of my redemption, you give to me as the firmest testimony of your grace toward me.

As often as I have, through sin, fallen from the baptismal covenant, so often does the return to it stand open to me through true and the salutary use of this Supper. It is a sacrament of the New Testament. It blesses me again and again with new gifts of grace. In this body dwells life itself, and this life restores me to eternal life and

makes me alive. Through the shedding of this blood, satisfaction for sins was obtained, thus drinking it ratifies the remission of my sins. Christ speaks; the truth speaks, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54), yes, to life, even glory. “For this is the bread of life, which came down from heaven, so that he who eats of it will not die but live forever” (John 6:50). The eating which Christ commends is that of faith. True faith is absolutely necessary when approaching the Supper for sacramental eating so that which was instituted unto life, is received by us unto life.

Therefore, I approach this heavenly meal with true faith, most firmly convinced that the body, which I eat, is the one given for me unto death; that the blood, which I drink, is the blood shed for my sins. From now on I cannot doubt concerning the forgiveness of sins, since it is affirmed by my partaking of the price which was offered for my sins, the very blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19, Rev. 1:5; 5:9).

From now on I cannot doubt concerning the indwelling of Christ, since it is sealed for me in the imparting of his body and blood. From now on I cannot doubt concerning the assistance of the Holy Spirit, since my weakness is strengthened by such a support. I do not fear the plots of Satan, since this angelic food strengthens me to do battle. I do not fear the allurements of the flesh, since this life-giving and spiritual food strengthens me by the power of the Spirit. I eat and drink this food so that Christ may dwell in me and I in Christ. That Good Shepherd will not allow the sheep, fed by his body and blood, to be devoured by the infernal wolf. He will not allow the strength of the Spirit to be overcome by the weakness of my flesh. Praise, honor, and thanksgiving to You, O kindest Savior, forever. Amen.⁷⁷

Pietism and the Decline of Orthodox Lutheran Piety

During the seventeenth century, and in the early decades of the eighteenth century there arose Pietism, the movement supposedly started to counteract the “dead orthodoxy” of historic churches of the Reformation. One of the most eloquent Lutheran opponents of Pietism was Valentin Ernst Löscher, an orthodox Lutheran theologian noted for personal piety. In his thorough analysis of Pietism known as *Timotheus Verinus*, he offers a very accurate definition of Pietism.

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It is an evil in the Church that arises in the context of the pursuit of piety. That is, it is a searching, striving and demanding of piety that is ill-conceived and established in a sinful way. It creates an antithesis between 1) piety and its pursuit and 2) revealed truth and its pursuit. Moreover, it causes truth to be dependent on piety. Pietism completely absorbs truth into itself and so it nullifies the truth. By all this the Church of Christ is thrown into confusion and a raft of other unholy things find their way into it.

The evil of Pietism is among us as long as the pursuit of piety stirs up and sustains a conflict and sets up an antithesis between itself and even one important point of religion. It is among us as long as a person believes and teaches that piety must be pursued more strenuously than orthodoxy and given preferential treatment. Furthermore, it can come to the point that the truth and form of theology (namely the Word of God), the office of preacher, justification, matrimony, the church and other matters are all put into a dependent relationship to piety, in which case the evil shows itself more forcefully and clearly. Finally, it can come to the point where people think that wherever piety is not found in the form and to the degree hoped for, then no Word of God, no activity of the Holy Spirit, no light of grace, no office of teaching, no matrimony, no church can exist. Thus Pietism has fully matured and come out into the open.⁷⁸

Löscher explained how Pietism worked itself out in the church. Here is how he described the behavior of the Lutheran Pietists.

They scorned pure doctrine, orthodoxy, and the means used to preserve pure doctrine. They scoffed at church ordinances and usages, and slandered and nullified sermons, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the preaching ministry. They dared to abstain from the public worship, as well as from the use of the Lord's Supper along with fellow Christians, since they regard these fellow Christians as, for the most part, unregenerate and unholy. They have the audacity to maintain that they alone, as true disciples and followers of Christ, are holy and pious, and hence they despise all others. Since they insolently judge the Lutheran Church ceremonies and assemblies to be an accursed Babel, they are not ashamed to instigate private worship and special secret conventicles. By means of all this, they sufficiently

uncover their corrupt minds and ways. Without the necessary distinctions, they confuse the spiritual priesthood with the public ministry, the use with the abuse of adiaphora, the ministry with the person, and God's order with man's disorder; they reject the one with the other, the gold with the dross.

And in another description we read:

They despised and slandered the public worship services, the assemblies in the churches and the regular preachers. Instead, they endeavored to include everything in their private assemblies.⁷⁹

We mention Pietism, for from Pietism flow any number of false and erroneous attitudes toward prayer, for instance, the common belief that prayers spoken from the heart are of somehow better quality than prayers read from a set liturgy or form. Also, Pietism has tended to encourage the formation of "cell groups" or little "churches within the church" which may tend to encourage the attitude that these little groups are more "church" than the gathering of the entire congregation around Word and Sacrament. Pietism had a very negative impact on Lutheranism. Pietism resulted in a drastic decline in participation in the Lord's Supper and is responsible for the attitude that it is best not to receive the Lord's Supper too often, perhaps only four times a year. In Pietism, prayer became more a mystical and ecstatic experience than a reflection of one's meditation on the Word. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are descendants of classical Pietism (which, by the way, was a movement not restricted only to the Lutheran Church). We need today to take great care that we not permit the negative influences of Pietism to lead us down the wrong path in regard to prayer and the devotional life.

We have now reached the conclusion of our survey of prayer in the history of the Church. Having moved from the earliest Christians through the first several centuries to the Reformation and Lutheran Orthodoxy and then to the era of Pietism, we have seen how prayer has been at the heart of the church's life from its very beginnings. Through the positive examples provided for us in the history of the

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church and many Christian thinkers, we have a rich heritage of prayer and the devotional life from which to draw when we consider prayer in our present day and age. It is to this final subject that we now turn.

Prayer and the Devotional Life Today

I am encouraged by the fact that as I speak about prayer in our Synod, people everywhere indicate what an important role prayer plays in their lives. This is encouraging for two reasons. First, our people seem to be finding it easier to talk about prayer and are more willing to do so. Second, I genuinely sense that our people are realizing more and more how important being devoted to prayer and the Word is for them. In the final section of this little book, I would like to draw together a number of practical observations and reflections on prayer, offering some guidance and encouragement as we strengthen our commitment to prayer and the devotional life.

Prayer Anchored in the Word of God

We need to make sure our prayer lives are firmly anchored in the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. This does not mean that you cannot say a prayer unless you first read a portion of Scripture. But it does mean that the Holy Scriptures must be the focus and foundation of our prayer lives. For example, think of the parable of the sower. The seed fell on four different types of soil. So also the Word of God can fall into four different types of soil when we hear it. There are the hard-hearted, the weak-hearted, the fainthearted and the strong-hearted recipients of the Word of God. As we ponder the truths of this portion of the Word of God, we can turn to God in prayer and ask that he would cause the reading of his Word in our lives always to fall into good soil and bring forth fruit to the glory of his holy name. Or consider the account of the Transfiguration of our Lord, when Peter said, "It is good Lord to be here." As we read that portion of Scripture, we can pause and say a prayer to God, saying, "Yes, Lord, it is good for me daily to be with you in your Word. What a blessing for me to gather Sunday after Sunday with my fellow Christians to hear your Word, to receive your Sacrament and to sing your praises. Yes, Lord, it is good

for me to be here with you. Keep me close to you always.” As you read through the Scriptures, there are constant opportunities for prayer.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an excellent essay titled *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, in which he offers the following observations regarding the relationship between Scripture and prayer.

“Lord, teach us to pray!” So spoke the disciples to Jesus.... “To learn to pray” sounds contradictory to us. Either the heart is so overflowing that it begins to pray by itself, we say, or it will never learn to pray. But this is a dangerous error, which is certainly very widespread among Christians today, to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We then confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing—all of which the heart can certainly do on its own—with praying. But in so doing we confuse earth and heaven, human beings and God. Praying certainly does not mean simply pouring out one’s heart. It means, rather, finding the way to and speaking with God, whether the heart is full or empty. No one can do that on one’s own. For that one needs Jesus Christ.⁸⁰

Bonhoeffer makes a very good point: that Christians will run out of words to say as they seek ways to speak to God. He describes this as a great struggle. The solution? The Scriptures. He urges us to view the Scriptures as the living voice of God, and the Psalms in particular as the prayers of the Church, most importantly, the prayers of the Christ, who speaks through the Psalms. The Holy Scriptures are the anchor for our prayers. Bonhoeffer explains how:

We must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because the parent speaks to the child. The child learns the language of the parent. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken and speaks to us. In the language of the Father in heaven God’s children learn to speak with God. Repeating God’s own words, we begin to pray to God. We ought to speak to God, and God wishes to hear us, not in the false and confused language of our heart but in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we want to pray with

assurance and joy, then the word of Holy Scripture must be the firm foundation of our prayer. Here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words that come from God will be the steps on which we find our way to God.⁸¹

For good reason, Bonhoeffer appeals to Christians to consider the Psalms the prayer book of the Bible. With Luther, Bonhoeffer sees a special connection between the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms. He quotes Luther, who once wrote of this connection that the Psalter ". . . runs through the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer runs through it, so that it is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony."⁸²

Again, we would emphasize that the Scriptures are the best and most abundant source for our prayer life. If our prayers are not a response to Scripture—formed and shaped by Scripture—we will soon be drifting away in our own self-centered concerns and will find that our prayer lives are dry and empty. We will find that we pray for the same thing over and over and that our prayers become repetitious and monotonous. But with the never-ending resource of the Scriptures, such as the Psalms and even the four Gospels, we have an endless supply of prayer and meditation, as we speak to God words that he has first spoken to us. As we use the words He has given first to us, we will find a living and never-ending fountain of prayer from which we may speak to our Lord, even as he invites and encourages us to do, for his sake.

Expanding the Scope of Prayer

If there were only two telephone lines to heaven, with one being the "give me" line and the other the "thank-you" line, every time you dialed the "give me" line you would get a busy signal, but you would probably be able to get through on the "thank-you" line with your very first attempt. More than likely when you read this you will smile because you recognize how true this is. We can become so remiss in our thanks to God for his ongoing blessings in our lives. The key is to turn away from this deficiency in our prayer lives and correct it

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through a regular pattern of life in the Word and prayer. In my own life, I find it helpful to identify very specifically the things for which I want to give thanks to the Lord, both in my own life and also in the lives of others.

Prayer is meant to be much more than a panic button that we push whenever we are in trouble. The Lord invites us to come to him in every need, and certainly in crisis moments, we will turn to the Lord fervently; however, we need to realize that prayer is to be an ongoing reality in the lives of the people of God. I am concerned that many view prayer as a sort of “last resort” when all other resources and means of dealing with a problem have failed. When things are going well, it is all too tempting to permit our prayer lives to slip. This is not the sort of devotion to the Word and prayer that the Lord wants for us as his own dear people.

It is also so easy for us to limit the scope of our prayer just to our own personal needs and the issues directly affecting our lives. Reach out beyond the scope of your own life to others. Include prayer for our pastors and other church workers. Pray for the leaders of our church. Pray for the leaders of your congregation. Pray for all who are suffering and in need. Some people have found it helpful to have a prayer list so that they can remember various needs when they spend time with the Lord in prayer. We certainly want to pray for more than just our own needs and wishes, thoughts and desires. The Lord urges us in his word to pray for one another. As we expand the scope of our prayers, our prayer life will become more mature, richer and more meaningful.

I have found that for me, praying in a variety of categories is helpful. If you could be a little mouse listening in on my prayers, you would find that the very first prayer I offer is a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the forgiveness of sins and salvation that is mine in Jesus Christ. I would have to confess that there was many a year when I did not specifically include a petition of thanks to God for the forgiveness of my sins and for the salvation that he gives me in Jesus Christ. I do not want to give you the impression that I was not thankful for my salvation; it

was just that I neglected to thank God specifically for the forgiveness he gives me in Christ Jesus. My morning prayers generally begin with something like this: “I said it to you last night, and I’ll say it again tomorrow, but I want again to thank you for the forgiveness which is mine in Jesus Christ my Savior, and the salvation that I have to look forward to. Without a doubt, it is the greatest gift that you will ever give me in my entire life.”

In addition to the category of thanksgiving for the salvation that is mine in Jesus Christ, another category I include in my prayers has to do with the other spiritual blessings that God gives to us as his children. I include words of thanks for the privilege of prayer, for the privilege of worshipping with God’s people. These prayers simply acknowledge to God how great it is to be one of his children and to have all the spiritual and temporal blessings that he pours out on us.

Another category is personal needs. Not a day goes by that I do not find myself asking God for the wisdom to lead our people aright. There is nothing that I desire more than to be a spiritual leader of the people of God, strengthening and leading our church forward in the Master’s name. The needs of others is usually the next category for which I pray for. I pray for the members of our family, for my relatives, friends, co-workers in the ministry, my staff, our district presidents, our Synod’s national staff, our world missionaries, the needs of the world, peace in the world, etc.

The next category I move into is one that has to do with what I like to call the “agenda needs” of the day. If I’m going to be meeting with someone during the course of the day, I bring that into my prayers. If I’m aware of this or that particular item on my desk that needs to be taken care of, this is also added to my prayer life. I have found this to be so helpful as I carry to the Lord every aspect of my daily life and ask that he would be with, guide and bless me. There is still another category that I need to mention. I call it the category of thanks and praise—items for which we need daily to turn to God and say, “Thanks, God.” I think this is an area where all of us can improve.

But there is one more category I wish to mention. It is the catego-

ry of prayer for those who could very well be called our enemies. I find it is so important to include prayers for those who would just love to scuttle what I am trying to accomplish in our Synod. Sometimes the means that they use in their attempts to achieve their goals are less than God-pleasing. But it is important that I continue to bring these people before God in prayer, asking that God not cause me to develop a similar attitude over and against them, but rather that I continue to reach out to them in love, and ask that the feelings they might have for me will not come to the harm of the church and his Gospel. So that also I would list as a category that needs to come into our prayers.

Now I can well imagine that you could say, “Well, why not this? Why didn’t you add that?” Great! In saying that to me you are actually beginning to identify some additional categories in your life that you wish to bring before the throne of God. You know that he will hear and answer your prayers according to his good will.

When God Seems to Be Saying “No”

How do we as Christians handle things when it appears that God is answering our prayers with a “No,” or when he is delaying in answering our prayers? This can be a very difficult situation for the Christian to take. In my own life, the most difficult example of this was when my wife, Jean, passed away in October 1996. Her death was preceded by great suffering and pain as she struggled with cancer. I cannot tell you the number of times that Jean and I turned to the Lord during her last months asking him to extend her life and reduce the suffering she was experiencing. God, in his wisdom, answered our prayers, “No.” How are we to respond when God says “No”?

I believe one important way to handle this situation is to trust the Lord when he says to us in his Word, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). God is telling us, “Simply know that while you cannot fully understand what is happening in your life at this point in time, I am still God and I do not do anything wrong in your life.” Is this difficult to accept? Yes, of course. Impossible? No, not at all. Going one step further, what do we do when God seems to be answering “Not yet”? It

is hard to know the difference between a “No” and a “Not yet” from God. When do we know when it may be time to stop praying for something because God has said “No” or “Not yet”? I have found it helpful to turn to God in prayer and ask him to give me the wisdom to recognize the difference between a “No” and a “Not yet.” I think of the Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” which the Lord did not take away, but instead told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” The Lord answered “No,” but at the same time gave Paul the strength and promise he needed to bear the situation. The same is true for you and for me.

Resources for Prayer and the Devotional Life

The Bible is both the most important and the best resource Christians have for a full, rich prayer life. We have discussed this previously, but here again I would emphasize how important it is that we use the Scriptures to provide the framework for our prayer, as Luther urged. God speaks to us, we listen and then we respond in prayer to his Word. This is the classic model of Christian prayer. There are many valuable resources for prayer available to Christians. I encourage you to make use of such resources, for I am sure they will be of assistance to you in strengthening your devotion to the Word and prayer.

It is helpful to recognize that the church’s classic orders of prayer are invaluable tools for us in our prayer lives, for they anchor our prayers in the Word of God. I have here in mind the Orders of Matins and Vespers, of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, or the orders of the Suffrages, called “Responsive Prayer” in *Lutheran Worship*. These items and even the hymns themselves are tremendous resources to help Christians frame their prayers in an orderly and thoroughly Biblical pattern. I would very much like to encourage you to consider using the hymnal daily in your prayer life. I believe it is a true treasure for a full prayer life.

There are other resources that you may wish to consider using in conjunction with your regular time of prayer. *Today’s Light* is a new daily devotional study from Concordia Publishing House. It will help you move through the entire Bible in meditation and reflection.

Another popular resource is *Portals of Prayer*, which provides a biblical reading and a Psalm, along with a structured order of prayer, and a devotional thought based on the Word. Prayers for every day and special occasions are included in the back of each copy of *Portals of Prayer*. This resource too is available from Concordia Publishing House.

There are a number of other resources I want to mention briefly. An excellent resource for families with young children is the Concordia Publishing House series titled *Little Visits with God*. By the same author is a collection of prayers for very small children called *Little Folded Hands*, intended for children ages 6–10. *Prayers for Little People* is a collection of prayers for children, with beautiful color illustrations. The popular devotional author Herman W. Gockel compiled *A Child's Garden of Prayer*. For families with elementary-school-age children, there is the very well done magazine titled *My Devotions*. A book of prayers for teenagers is *Teenagers Pray*. There is also *Living for Christ*, written for teenagers, containing meditations and prayers. For adults there are many resources in addition to *Portals of Prayer*.

In addition to our church's hymnals, *The Lutheran Hymnal* and *Lutheran Worship*, there are collections of prayers and devotional thoughts available. *The Lutheran Book of Prayer* and *My Prayer Book* are collections of prayers for a wide variety of circumstances in life. *Each Day with Jesus* and *My Daily Devotions* are two good collections of daily devotions with suggested Scripture readings, hymn verses and a prayer. Many people have found *Daily Walk with God: Meditations for Every Day*, by Herman Gockel, to be a particularly meaningful collection of daily devotions. An excellent way of getting into the Psalms is to use *Psalms: With Introductions by Martin Luther*. This is a translation of all of Luther's introductions to the Psalms. It is a highly useful resource for it grounds our prayers in the Psalms and connects them to the Lord's Prayer.

If you are interested in using Luther's thoughts in your daily devotions, several useful tools come to mind. There is *Luther for the Busy Man*, by P.D. Pahl, based on Luther's sermons on the Gospels. This

provides a brief devotion for every day. Another collection of devotions based on Luther's writing is *Day by Day We Magnify Thee*, which are daily readings for the church year drawn from the writings of Luther. It is available from Fortress Press. A more substantial collection of devotions from the pen of Luther is found in *Luther's Family Devotions*, recently translated.⁸³ This is a collection of daily devotions and meditations drawn from Luther's sermons, suitable for personal or family use. This is a particularly good collection for the person looking for something a bit more substantial in his daily devotional life.

An often-overlooked resource for prayer is the Small Catechism. Taking the Catechism, and reading through the same, we are able to shape and guide our prayers as we think of the various parts of the catechism and then are led to pray based on the various explanations and truths contained in the Catechism. The Small Catechism is a hidden treasure. I believe for far too long we have viewed the Catechism as something only confirmation children study. It is a handbook for the Christian life and certainly also a valuable resource for prayer.

Finally, I should mention here the little book called *Luther's Prayers*, printed by Fortress Press. This is a marvelous collection of prayers by Luther, based on his writings on prayer and organized around the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed, along with prayers devoted to a variety of subjects.

For persons who are sick, shut-in or hospitalized there is a very helpful magazine called *Strength for the Day*, which contains excellent devotional meditation on Scripture, as well as suggestions for prayer. It too is available from Concordia Publishing House and would be a good resource to share with those suffering in your congregation.

We also need to give very serious consideration to Luther's suggested pattern for morning and evening Prayer. You find a brief order of morning and evening prayer in the Small Catechism, and also in *Lutheran Worship*, pp. 300ff.

Another important resource for prayer is the Lord's Prayer. We have taken note of Luther's comments regarding the Lord's Prayer in his essay on prayer. Recently someone asked me a very interesting ques-

tion: “I really wonder how often our people pray the Lord’s Prayer during the week?” We say it on Sunday morning, but is it to be used only on Sunday morning? Of course not. Should not the Lord’s Prayer be something that daily marks our lives of prayer? Absolutely! There is no better prayer for the Christian, for it is the prayer our own dear Lord Jesus Christ gave to us. I have appended Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer to this book.

As you can tell, there are numerous helpful resources for our prayer and devotional life. The foundational resource for prayer is the Holy Scriptures. Without Holy Scripture, our prayers will become repetitious and simply cover the same ground over and over again. With Scripture as our foundation our prayers will expand to include numerous topics we may never have considered before. The resources are there; our challenge is to make use of them, daily and faithfully.

Prayer in the Christian Family

Over the years, I would find myself assisting young families as they worked to establish a good habit of daily prayer together. Perhaps your family is regular and faithful in prayer. For that we praise God. But we know from many studies that daily prayer is not something that marks the practice of many of our families. Where to begin? First, it is important to resolve together as a family to start praying together. Many families find it helpful to set aside time after a meal to do this. With busy schedules this is sometimes quite difficult, but perhaps we should be asking ourselves if we have become *too* busy for our own good. If the strength and vitality of our family suffers because too many members of the family are headed in opposite directions constantly, then perhaps there needs to be some serious soul-searching to see if there is not some way to carve time out of the busy family schedule for prayer.

Second, families need to keep things simple. Unfortunately, well-intentioned parents sometimes try to do too much with daily family devotions. I would like here to encourage our families to consider keeping things quite basic, particularly when young children are involved. Attention spans are quite short and we simply need to be sensitive to

this. Saying the Lord's Prayer is a helpful way to introduce children to prayer. Putting the words of our Lord into their mouths at a very early age is something that we need to encourage all of our families to do. A short prayer for the needs of the day can follow. Perhaps one of the many devotional resources that have been mentioned can be used to reach young children at their level. The singing of hymns, perhaps working on learning one hymn well, rather than simply trying to sing dozens of hymns, is something that needs to be considered.

As the children grow older, the need for family devotions certainly does not decrease. No, quite the opposite! But again, keeping things simple and brief is helpful. Time for prayer and the sharing of family concerns on the basis of the Word is a wonderful part of family life. Making use of a structured order of prayer remains an important aspect of good family devotions. Use the hymnal's suggested orders of morning or evening prayers, or the order of devotions suggested in devotional resources like *Portals of Prayer*. But again, family devotions need not be laborious episodes that tax the patience of children and parents alike—a brief reading from Scripture, a devotional thought, the Lord's Prayer, a prayer for the day and perhaps a hymn. This is one way many families have found it possible to have very enriching times together in the Word and prayer.

As the children move out of the house, devotional life can suffer because husband and wife have become so accustomed to having devotions with the children present that devotions now seem less than adequate without them there. But I suspect that many couples will discover that time spent together in prayer and the Word is an enriching aspect of their marriage. How well I can still recall the important and meaningful role daily family devotions and prayer played in our lives even after the children were gone.

The Public Prayer of the Church

A vital aspect of the Christian service of worship is the public prayer offered to God by those gathered. As we have seen in this study, public, corporate prayer has been a constant and vital feature of Chris-

tian worship since the earliest days of the church. In recent years, we have noticed a growing desire for more attention to prayer in the worship services of our congregations. Oftentimes, this brings with it the desire that there be more participation on the part of the people during the church's prayers. At the same time, there has been a decline in the general prayers of the church which permit the church to pray for a broad range of needs and concerns. Some have noticed how many prayers offered now are more inward-looking, involving only the concerns of the local congregation. The General Prayer, which was regularly a feature in most Lutheran worship services in the past, permits the congregation to extend the scope of its corporate prayers beyond its four walls. There is much to be commended in this approach.

There is still another factor which has contributed to some confusion over the nature of the corporate prayers offered in church. As personal prayer and small groups have become emphasized, this has sometimes resulted in playing down the corporate prayers of the church gathered around Word and Sacrament. As the Scriptures make clear to us, the corporate prayer of the church is a vital component of public worship. The church, gathered by Christ around his Gospel and Sacraments, intercedes for the whole world during its prayers. We need to keep this "big picture" in mind as we focus our attention on the church's corporate prayers.

Throughout the church's history, in both Old and New Testament, corporate prayer was an essential part of the relationship between the people of God and their Lord. The major features of corporate prayer in church is prayer for all the people of God, the work of pastors and missionaries, asking that the Gospel would be preached by them faithfully and boldly and would be received in faith by those to whom they preach. The church will also remember in its prayer the sending forth of missionaries into new parts of the world, to new groups of people who have not heard the Gospel. The congregation in worship also prays for all of mankind, asking God to help them in their needs and asking him to forgive their sins. Perhaps we do not fully appreciate what an important duty the church has to pray together during the service.

The location of the corporate prayers of the church in the worship service indicates, once again, the foundation of all prayer—the Word of God. In the church’s liturgy, public prayer follows the sermon. Prayer is always a response in faith to the proclamation of the Word of God. Prayers in church will often contain the images and words used in Scripture. Prayers offered in this manner are truly the “sacrifice of thanksgiving” referred to in Scripture and affirmed eloquently in our Lutheran Confessions. We offer prayers to God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and so respond to the Word which has been proclaimed to us. Coming as it does before Holy Communion, we therefore will also be sure to pray for God’s gifts that we are about to receive in the Sacrament of the Altar.

What then is the shape of prayer in public worship? Prayers offered in church are always offered in the name of the Triune God. It is important that we also do so in our own personal prayers. We address God generally as God the Father, since he is the first person of the Holy Trinity, the source of every good and perfect gift. We follow the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ who spoke to his Father in prayer. Through Jesus we approach our heavenly Father. Oftentimes, prayers offered in church will also pray that the Holy Spirit unite and guide us in our prayers. Then there is offered a thanksgiving for a particular blessing generally connected with that point in the church year at which we find ourselves. Following this, various intercessions are offered, in the following traditional order: for the church and its servants, for the nations of the world and their rulers, and then for problems and needs of particular people. At this point, it is wise to incorporate opportunities for the people in worship to make the prayer their own by permitting them to join in petitioning God. Thus we have the custom of the pastor saying, “Lord, in your mercy,” and the people completing the sentence, “Hear our prayer.” And of course, finally, the prayer of prayers, the Lord’s Prayer, is always said in the church service.

Thus in the public worship of the church, there are rich opportunities for corporate prayers that help us reach beyond our personal

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concerns and join the whole people of God throughout Christendom in offering prayer to God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord. The General Prayer of the church has fallen out of disfavor to some extent and that is truly unfortunate, for it is a marvelous way to bringing a wide range of petitions to God. Here is the general prayer of the church, as it is found in our hymnal *Lutheran Worship*. I invite you to read this carefully and see if you do not agree with me that this prayer deserves frequent use in our congregations.

Almighty and eternal God, worthy to be held in reverence by all the children of men, we give you humble and hearty thanks for the innumerable blessings which without any merit or worthiness on our part you have bestowed on us.

We praise you especially that you have preserved for us your saving Word and the holy sacraments. And we implore you, O Lord, to grant and preserve to your holy Church throughout the world purity of doctrine and faithful pastors to preach your Word with power. Help all who hear the Word rightly to understand and truly to believe it. Send laborers into your harvest, and open the door of faith to those who do not know you. In mercy remember the enemies of your Church, and grant them repentance to life. Protect and defend your Church in all tribulation and danger. Strengthen us and all fellow Christians to set our hope fully on the grace revealed in Christ, and help us to fight the good fight of faith that in the end we may receive the salvation of our souls.

Bestow your grace on all nations of the earth. Bless especially our country and its inhabitants and all who are in authority. Let your glory dwell in our land that mercy and truth, righteousness and peace may everywhere abound. We commend to you the care of all our schools and ask you to grant that our children may grow in useful knowledge and Christian virtue and bring forth wholesome fruits of life.

Graciously defend us from all calamity by fire and water, from war and pestilence, from scarcity and famine, and from every other evil. Protect and prosper everyone in his rightful calling, and let all useful arts flourish among us. Be the God and Father of the widow and the fatherless, the helper of the sick and needy, and the comforter of the forsaken and distressed.

Accept, we implore you, our bodies and souls, our hearts and minds, and our talents and powers, together with the offerings we bring before you, for your praise and service.

Grant your Holy Spirit to those who come to the Lord's Table today that they may receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ in sincere repentance and firm faith and to their abundant blessing.

As we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, help us by true faith and a godly life to prepare for the world to come, doing the work you have given us to do while it is day, before the night comes when no one can work. And when our last hour comes, support us by your power, and receive us into your heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

As we offer our petitions to God, how good to be able to do so as a congregation of believers bringing our concerns to the throne of grace as his people, not simply as isolated individuals. In fact, we should be mindful of this public gathering as we engage in private devotions, for on this point we do need to be very clear: Private prayer and devotions must never become a substitute for gathering as the people of God around the preaching of the Word and the giving out of God's Sacraments. This is the point to which we return, week in and week out, and the point from which we go forth in the week. Our daily prayers, in the privacy of our own room, or with our family, must always lead us once again to the public gathering on Sunday morning. What a blessing that we are able to join in public worship with fellow believers, praying for God's blessings and mercy with one another! The church is not individual Christians each "doing their own thing." The church is the gathering of the saints around Word and Sacraments. The church is the body of Christ who gathers his people through his Word and through his Sacraments. Thus, in this gathering, we together as God's people approach the throne of grace, trusting in his mercy, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Encouraging One Another in Prayer and the Devotional Life

W E END WHERE WE BEGAN—with words of genuine encouragement to redouble our effort to be intentional about our life in the Word—our lives of prayer. If one were to identify some of the key “findings” in this brief study of prayer, they would include the following important points.

First, prayer is the Christian’s conversation with God, a response to the blessing and mercy that he has poured out in our lives through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Prayer is never a way to earn God’s favor but is always a result of God’s grace given first to us, grace by which we are brought to faith, and grace by which we are sustained in our faith. God invites us to pray to him because we are his children through Jesus Christ.

Second, prayer is grounded in the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. The further we get from the Word in our prayers, the further we will be from a truly rich and meaningful devotional life. The Word of God opens rich and unending opportunities for prayer. In our look at Luther’s prayer life we have a good model of how the Scriptures form the basis of prayer. Christians throughout the ages have based their prayers on meditation on the Scriptures, for they have recognized that in speaking to God, they need first to listen to God.

Third, life in the Word and prayer is built on a regular routine of prayer. We have seen how Christians through the ages have anchored their prayer lives in regular times for prayer: morning and evening and so forth. From a practical standpoint, the less routine prayer is for us, the less praying we will do. It really is that simple, but oh how difficult to put into practice! There is so much to distract us. Our work on a good, disciplined life of prayer is something we need to continue improving.

Fourth, the Lord's Prayer is the Christian's best prayer. This is the consensus of all the great teachers of the church, and with good reason. We have seen how the church has drawn upon the treasures of the Word of God to develop set forms and patterns of prayer, which, in turn, permit the mind to focus on many areas for prayer. We have identified the errors of the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements, which grew from the movement known as Pietism. We need to be on guard lest we become caught up in these misunderstandings of prayer. We have seen how both formal prayer, and prayers flowing spontaneously from our meditation on the Word, are pleasing to God and form the basis for a sound prayer life.

Fifth, the prayer lives of our families, of our church, and of ourselves are interrelated. Personal prayer and devotion must never become a substitute for the church's worship services. As we are gathered by our Lord, week in and week out, to receive the gifts of forgiveness through the Gospel proclaimed and through the Lord's Supper, we are given the strength we need to be devoted to him in our personal prayer lives. The family's devotions also are an outgrowth of their regular gathering around Word and Sacrament in church.

Sixth, and perhaps most important, prayer is both a command and a promise. We are commanded by God to pray. That is as sure and certain a command as any we receive from the Lord. "Call on me," our Lord says. Luther explains the Lord's desire for us to call on his name and to "pray, praise and give thanks." As we look at our lives of prayer and compare them to the Lord's expectation for us we recognize that we have not been as faithful as we should. There are times when our devotion to his Word and prayer leave something to be desired. For this sinful neglect of both prayer and the Word of God, we turn to our God for his forgiveness. There is no need, nor certainly any possibility, to cover up our failures, for our Lord both knows and understands them.

The promise of prayer, though, is that God not only commands prayer, but graciously invites us to pray—"as dear children would ask their dear father in heaven," we are told by Luther in his Small Cate-

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chism. Our Lord is listening to our prayer and waiting for us to approach him in prayer. What a joyful privilege to know that the one who listens is the one who forgives us through our Lord Jesus Christ! The blood shed on the cross and the blood distributed in the Lord's Supper is the blood of none other than the Son of God, who tenderly invites us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven."

What a joyful privilege it is for us to know that our Heavenly Father loves us and cares for us as his own dear children. He loves us so much that he wants us to come to him with all our concerns, thoughts, troubles, joys and needs. Therefore, let us pray:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we, your unworthy servants, give you most humble and hearty thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all mankind. We praise you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. We implore you to give us that due sense of all your mercies that our hearts may ever be deeply thankful and that we may show forth your praise with both our lips and our lives. Let us walk before you in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life and enjoy the testimony of a good conscience and the hope of your favor, be sustained and comforted in every time of trouble, and finally be received into your everlasting kingdom; through your infinite mercy in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen

Notes

1. An extremely helpful resource for understanding the practices of the first Christians is Paul F. Bradshaw's *Daily Prayer in The Early Church: A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

2. Bradshaw, p. 9.

3. Bradshaw, p. 24.

4. Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), pp. 65–66.

5. AC XXI.2–4; Tappert, p. 47. Note: All references to the Lutheran Confessions indicate the document being quoted and then the page number in the standard English translation of the Lutheran Confessions, the Tappert edition. (Theodore G. Tappert, Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert Fischer and Arthur C. Piepkorn, eds. and trans. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959]).

6. SA II.ii.25; Tappert, p. 297.

7. SA II.ii.26; Tappert, 297.

8. AC XXVI.8–11; Tappert, p. 65.

9. AC XXVII.49–50; Tappert, p. 78–79.

10. Ap. IV.125; Tappert, p. 124.

11. Ap. IV.331; Tappert, p. 158.

12. Ap. XIII.16; Tappert, p. 213.

13. Ap. XV.40–41; Tappert, p. 220.

14. Ap. XXIV.3; Tappert, p. 250.

15. Ap. XXI.19; Tappert, p. 231–232.
16. Ap. XXI.20; Tappert, p. 232.
17. LC III.6; Tappert, p. 421.
18. LC III.15; Tappert, p. 422.
19. LC III.16–18; Tappert, p. 422–423.
20. LC III.10 from Samuel F. Janzow, trans. and ed., *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 79.
21. LC III.21; Janzow, p. 81.
22. LC I.70; Janzow, pp. 23–24.
23. LC I.326; Janzow, pp. 65–66.
24. LC III.71; Janzow, p. 24.
25. AE 21:146. Reference to the standard English translation *Luther's Works: American Edition* (Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House).
26. LC III; Janzow, pp. 81–82.
27. SC III.2; Tappert, p. 346.
28. The *Didache* is a document that receives its name from the first sentence which says, “The teaching (Greek “didache”) of the twelve apostles.” Scholars believe the document was written during the first century. It is one of the most ancient Christian documents that we know of.
29. Clement of Alexandria was a Christian theologian who became head of the Christian school in Alexandria, Egypt.
30. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 7.7.
31. *Stromata*, 2.23 and *Pedagog.* 2.4.
32. *Stromata*, 7.7.

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33. Origen was an Alexandrian theologian who specialized in the interpretation of the Bible.

34. De Or., 12.2.

35. A famous defender of the Christian faith. Tertullian was born and lived in the North African city of Carthage.

36. ANF III, p. 46. Reference to *Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House).

37. De Or., 24.5.

38. De Or., 25.

39. Cyprian was the bishop of Carthage.

40. De Dom. Orat., 34-6.

41. Chrysostom, whose name means “golden mouth,” was famous for his preaching. He served as bishop of Antioch, in modern-day Turkey, and then later became bishop of Constantinople, the most important city in Eastern Christianity.

42. *Baptismal Instructions*, 8.17–18.

43. Ambrose was the bishop of Milan and exerted a powerful influence in the Western Church. his most famous student was Augustine, whom Ambrose baptized.

44. Ambrose, Exposition in Ps. 118, sermon, 19.22, 30.

45. Augustine, an adult convert to Christianity, was bishop of the North African town of Hippo Regius and the most influential early church theologian in the Western Church.

46. See the excellent article, “St. Augustine’s Theology of Prayer: Gracious Conformation” by Timothy Maschke in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine—Presbyter Factus Sum*, Edited by Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller and Roland J. Teske (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 431–446.

47. Maschke, p. 433.
48. Maschke, p. 433.
49. Bradshaw, p. 124.
50. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), p. 244.
51. Martin Luther, *The House Postils* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), Vol. 1:323. Hereafter referred to as “HP.”
 52. Luther, HP, 1:326–328.
 53. Luther, HP, 2:104–105.
 54. Luther, HP, 2:107, 108.
 55. Luther, HP, 2:110.
56. Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray* (1535), AE 43, pp. 187–211.
 57. AE 43:193.
 58. AE 43:193.
 59. AE 43:193.
 60. AE 43:195.
 61. AE 43:195.
 62. AE 43:198.
 63. AE 43:198.
 64. AE 43:199.
 65. AE 43:200.
 66. AE 43:200.
 67. AE 43:200–201.
 68. AE 43:209.

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69. Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, translated by Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p. 138.

70. Chemnitz, p. 141.

71. Chemnitz, p. 142.

72. Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 105.

73. Preus, p. 220.

74. Preus, p. 220.

75. Both of these works are available in English. *Sacred Meditations*, translated by C. W. Heisler (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1896; Reprinted by Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1991). *The Daily Exercise of Piety*, translated by Matthew Harrison (Decatur, Illinois: Repristination Press, 1992).

76. Gerhard, *Sacred Meditations*, p. 138.

77. Gerhard, *The Daily Exercise of Piety*, pp. 55–56.

78. V. E. Löscher, *Timotheus Verinus: Book Two*, translated by Robert Koester, (Unpublished translation), p. 2-1.

79. Valentin Ernst Löscher, translated by James Langebartels, *Complete Timotheus Verinus Or A Presentation of Truth and Peace in the Present Pietistic Controversies also A Christian and Forced Defense of his Doctrine, Ministry and Person Especially Against a Writing of Joachim Lange*, Part One, Printed at Wittenberg by Samuel Hannauer in 1726 (Unpublished translation, 1992), pp. 55–56.

80. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, translated by James H. Burtness in Volume 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 155.

81. Bonhoeffer, p. 156.

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82. Bonhoeffer, p. 158. Quote from WA, *Deutsche Bibel*, 10.2.155.

83. Georg Link, *Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year Gathered From the Writings of Martin Luther*, translated by Joel Bas-ley (Dearborn, Michigan: Mark V Publications, 1996).