

## **PRAYERS THAT ARE REFUSED**

*By The Rev. Ronald E. White*

One of the problems of the spiritual life, and I dare say a major problem for most human beings, is the problem of unanswered prayer. One of the earliest problems to emerge in prayer is unanswered prayer. Unanswered Prayers linger among the memories of our childhood, haunting us throughout our lives. We grow to adulthood in the secret belief God answers the prayer of others, but He does not answer our prayer. The evidence of unanswered prayer by God seems an overwhelming fact in our lives, giving us great cause to be angry with God. We think our anger toward God in not answering our prayer is justification for our rebellion against Him. And so, the ageless drum beat of our disobedience against God begins.

In the innocence of childhood, I prayed to God that He would miraculously intervene in my life. Oh, how I prayed for a miracle to lift me out of all my troubles. As if by the mysterious wave of God's Hand over me, my life would change instantaneously from the horrible and unthinkable to the beautiful and thinkable. It didn't seem an unreasonable request from my viewpoint—a prayer for God's magical kiss upon my forehead and after His Holy Kiss, everything would be all better.

It's a wonderful illusion we long for as children that God will answer our most heartfelt desires in life. In truth, most adults have not relinquished their illusion of God kissing them and making them all better. But is the stuff of our human dreams when we haven't a Divine understanding of God's Love and Mercy.

My prayers that God would save me, the way I desired to be saved, went unanswered through my long and desperate years of growing up. I am most certain you, at one time or another, have prayed for the human reality of your lives to be magically altered by God's Loving Hand. Our desire for "God's Magic" is strong and persistent through the desire of our souls. The demand of our souls upon God is that he erase our human troubles, clear away our misfortune, set to right His punishment upon the guilty who anger us or betray us, and then we discover, when you awake, all our human troubles remain. It is at this precise moment we are tempted to banish God to "Never-never Land"—the realm of our childish hopes and prayers. Falling to such temptation, we set our human course toward righting the wrongs of our human life alone.

I learned to squirrel myself away into the dark depths of my inner self; the place I had secured and purposed for myself. I walled up this place so carefully, making certain that only I could enter through the narrow door to the secrets of my soul. In absolute certainty, I knew that only I and I alone held the key to unlock the door. As the keeper of the key, I guarded the door with a soul's pride of ownership, pledging to guard the door with my very life. I made certain through my conditional life of my soul that I asked all the right questions in the certainty of knowing all the right answers. Those who did not answer my questions to my satisfaction were never allowed to enter. In truth, I had built my human kingdom to protect my soul from one special person only—God. I chose who to let in and who to leave out. After all, I reasoned, it was God who forced me to guard the realm in which I dwelt. God could have made it so much easier, if only He would have answered me! It's not hard to imagine that few were let in, especially God. There were times I allowed Him into my presence, but always on my soul's condition, which always meant upon my human terms.

In my childish imagination, I thought I wasn't asking for a lot. I prayed for my life to be like a Norman Rockwell illustration from the Saturday Evening Post Magazine. In other words, I prayed for my life to be idyllic and peaceful—a life without pain and suffering, violence and destruction.

I had good reason for such a prayer. I grew up under the authority of a mentally ill father who was a severe manic-depressive. Back then, which seems a long time ago, there were not today's wonder drugs. I lived under the constant pressure of never knowing from one moment to the next which personality I would meet in your father. Mood swings, the extreme highs and lows of the manic-depressive, were so gigantic and swift and frightening, that I felt always as if I were pressed against a wall without the hope of escape. At a moment's notice, I was forced to march to his manic steps on a three or four day high, if I was lucky, and then in a blink of an eye, I was plunged with him into the dark hole of his depression.

No one knows how terrifying mental illness can be, unless you have lived in close proximity to the sufferer of these illnesses. Society brushes off mental illness, in the most heartless and flippant manner, the dark worlds of the mentally ill. It is the loved one on their own who must find ways to survive in a shattered existence. Nothing in life is more life-incapacitating than mental illness, especially when it is so misunderstood and untreated. Those who live with sufferers of mental illness come to believe they are living with aliens from other worlds—especially the hellish world of Satan. They grow up in doubt, always questioning whether or not they are mentally ill.

All I can liken living with a father who was a manic-depressive was like riding on a roller-coaster. Now, at first thought, your imagination may trip to fanciful fun, a momentary thrill that lasts for a measured and calculated amount of time, and then ends as your coaster glides safely to a stop. You exit, exhilarated by emotion in the motion-thrill of the roller-coaster. All great fun, and indeed, a thrill all roller-coaster enthusiasts love and choose. But, what if you are not given the choice of ever stepping off the coaster? What if all you experience in the coaster ride is the chained climb up to the top, and then, the steep plunge to the bottom—endlessly? All options are narrowed when you live with mental illness to what the sufferer experiences. What you, the victim of the sufferer's world, think or feel is inconsequential. What matters is what the sufferer thinks or feels. Mental illness controls the world of the sufferer and it controls the world of those who love the sufferer.

As it is said, no one knows the depth of your human experience unless they have experienced it themselves. Without such an experience, you are just an observer looking in. You will never know or understand the raw-edged emotions that rub like open wounds and are made to fester in the extremes of love and hate. The experience of living with mental illness is like living lives, unraveling like streamers whipped by the winds of circumstance, being tattered to shreds. Unless you've lived it, you will never understand how you pray desperately for better days that never come. Oh, how you pray for God to kiss you and make it better.

I played a lot of "Jail" in my younger years with my brother. We had chairs with rail backs, making perfect bars for a jail cell. Sliding the chair in the opening of a large closet in our room, we'd close the sliding door against the chair and cover the openings above and below the chair with blankets. I remember always demanding to be the one who was imprisoned in the jail. For it was there in the darkness of that closet that I could close off the pain and suffering, violence and destruction of my life, if only for the briefest of moments. In truth, I would have given up my life for the scant taste of feeling truly safe and protected. You see, victims of mental illness sufferers think

they wear a bullseye on their chest, thinking they are not strong enough to take it off. Of course, my imagined world was not truly safe or protected, but I desired it, demanding it by all my soul's greediness. Yes, it is true, desperate people think desperate thoughts and do desperate deeds. You never know the true depth of your desperation because life is so exaggerated by the extremes of life. I would not know what it meant to be saved by God through Christ until much later in my life.

My brother bored of our game, especially when I wouldn't let him be the prisoner. Being the jailer isn't as much fun as being the prisoner in our pretend game. And so, he found other things to do. But, I played the game alone, without the rail-back chair in the opening. I simply closed the closet door, hiding in the peace of the darkness. I know now, of course, I was crying out for help, but I didn't know it then. Playing games with the emotions of the heart led to dangerous human consequences. As the years passed, I grew up moderately likable, but introverted, guarded, introspective, conditional, and demanding ultimate control of my life. For all of us, we are born with souls that demand to be the masters of our lives and the governors of our human destinies. It is the hallmark of original sin that God cast us out of the garden and we didn't mind in the least going. The meaning is clear—we give ourselves license to be gods of our lives, albeit false gods, but gods none-the-less. We demand someone to come, and they come. We demand them to go, and they go. So it is true for the one, true God. We demand God to come when we call out in prayer, and we demand God to leave when we do not get our way. But always, we are the mediator and advocate of our lives, blind to the true Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ, who has come into the world.

But, human life is driven unmercifully toward God. Life rubs stones of circumstance and experience together, grinding our human strength, resolve and endurance to powder. It is our personal reality check when we discover we are not riding life but life is riding us. The flesh and the sins of the flesh lead to death, as St. Paul warned us. While we remain in the flesh, we are not really alive but dead, for it leads to absolute dust. Where is our hope? Who is our hope, if we can't rely on ourselves to be the hope? How do we escape the inescapable? In our childish ways, we build upon the strength of our flesh an imagined sanctuary, a place of refuge and security. But such is the soul's illusions, as illusionary as my pretend jail cell made from a closet. Nothing is truly safe and secure in this world. It took me many long years, many dark closets of desperation, to know with certainty that's not God's promise in answering our prayer. He answers to what we need and not to what we desire.

This comes as a severe shock to most believers, especially when our souls demand it. In fact, it becomes down-right scary when this reality sinks in. God has not promised to kiss us and make everything better. What God does promise by the words of St. Paul is: **The glory is as sure as the suffering.**

When we pray that God would turn our lives to gold, it strikes the confidence of faith when it does not happen. At such things we are prone to smile, but in our childish souls they are intensely real. They shake the pillars of our childish universe, and often cast a shadow upon God. It grows more difficult to pray, in all the sweet simplicity of faith, when God has been clearly powerless in the cry of our soul's demands. There are childish troubles that vanish with the years, but that of unanswered prayer never vanishes. Sooner or later it comes back again, often in the life of intercession and petition. We refuse to hear the story of the Gospel, written for our spiritual help and comfort, when we are told there are instances of prayers that were refused.

There is, for example, the Gadarene demoniac who prayed that he might be granted company with Jesus. One might be certain the man's prayer would be granted by Jesus, who had said many times before, "Come unto Me." It was a prayer that sprang from the demoniac's adoring gratitude, for the Lord had performed a miracle—changing him into a man again. His prayer was born of conscious weakness; he dreaded the thought of being left alone. And yet, the man's prayer, lifted to God from a grateful heart and feeling only safety in the Divine Presence, was quietly and deliberately refused by Jesus. Indeed, the devils prayed for entrance to the swine, and that was granted them immediately by Jesus. The citizens prayed that Jesus would depart, and He commanded his disciples hoist the sail and go. The only prayer which was refused that day was the prayer of the Gadarene demoniac, when the Lord's gracious spirit could willingly grant it.

To the demoniac, it must have seemed inexplicable. It was a crushing and staggering refusal. It was as if the Lord were done with him, when Jesus could bar him from His presence. But to us, surveying the whole scene, things are no longer mysterious and dark; they are luminous with wisdom and mercy. What use would the man have been across the lake? Were the children of Abraham to be taught by aliens? Nobody knew him there, and none had seen him when he was in the horrid grip of Legion. But, at home, everybody knew him. They had talked about him at a hundred homes. They had heard the demoniac's cry shriek and wail, moan and growl through the night. His prayer was not refused because Christ spurned him. It was refused for the man's service, which sprang naturally from his life's witness. The man could do far greater things at home than by traveling to a foreign shore. And when prayers, for larger service, are refused, and every door is barred save the home-door, it is well we remember the Gadarene demoniac.

Another instance is that of the Apostle Paul, when he prayed that God would take away his thorn. How passionately he prayed for that. Speculations abound as to what was Paul's particular thorn, but we shall never know until we meet him. It was not for his own case that he was praying. He was not beseeching to be freed from pain. He rejoiced to share in the sufferings of his Lord, whose head had once been crowned with thorns at Calvary. What made him pray so eagerly and passionately that the sharp and festering thorn might be removed was its interference with his appointed service. What he could do, if only that thorn was gone! What new strength would be added to his voice! What a new appeal he would make to the Greek world, for the Greeks loved strength and beauty in a man. And then, in the highest interests of that service, which the apostle thought his thorn in the flesh was hindering, his eager prayer was steadily refused. That very hindrance was a means of grace. It cast him, body, mind and soul to the Lord's love and mercy alone. When the word came home to men with power, they knew the power was not human but Divine. So once again, in the unanswered prayer, there was vision and love and wisdom far more wonderful than any immediate answer would have shown.

Then, lastly, there is the prayer of Jesus—"If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." Like the apostle, He prayed that prayer three times in the last and sorest conflict of Gethsemane. There was more in that prayer than shrinking of the flesh. There was more in that bitter cup than human suffering. What made the drinking of that cup so awful was that it was red with human sin. And God so loved the world, and that great cry of His own Well-beloved Son was (with an infinite suffering) refused. Had it been granted there would have been no Calvary, no Cross in which to cry out, "It is finished." Had it been granted, no one would have ever sung—"When I survey the wondrous Cross."

Had it been granted, no poor despairing soul could ever have said quietly and without mistake, “He died for me.”

But, Divine Peace does not come by wishful thinking or praying. We cannot gather at the foot of the Cross, wistfully praying and proclaiming Christ’s death means life to us, unless we have willed to die only on the hope of being raised to life. So often, we kneel before the Cross in the hope of glory in an after-life that is as sure as our present sufferings, without realizing that God has promised the establishment of that glory in our lives now. Dying and rising is not the hope of our final death rattle, but in truth, we kneel before Christ’s Cross, knowing with ultimate certainty we are dead in the flesh but alive in the Spirit. In such a proclamation, we proclaim ourselves as: Dead Men Walking! We live out the judgment of our sentence for First Degree Murder: Death by living unto death.

The reality of the moment may drive you to your own closet in fear, knowing your own true hope for life is not in you, but in the one who was nailed to the Cross for you and your sin. Divine Peace pours out upon you like fragrant oil when you are reduced to a simple beggar—begging for life now and forever.

God yearns to grant that prayer, just as He yearns to grant your prayers and mine? Was not the Father afflicted in His Son’s suffering, being a Father with a father’s heart? I trust I am not irreverent in thinking that today, in glory, the Savior thanks His Father that His thrice-repeated petition was refused when He looks into His Eternal Father’s Eyes!

The sacred and the secular are not for our human judgment, but resides with God reconciling humanity to Himself through Christ. The Cross is God’s Divine Promise of His Will done on earth as it is in heaven. All too often, we think of ourselves as the mediators and advocates to God on the world’s behalf, without realizing our sin steals from Jesus Christ His rightful place before the Father’s Divine authority and power. For so it is for us, so it was for Christ, that he, too, had to give up His very life to God in the hope of being raised from the dead. Jesus Christ knows with certainty, **“The glory is as sure as the suffering.”**

Yes, indeed, the hint of such glory begins the moment we are grateful to God for breaking our souls and releasing our spirits in the continuous thankfulness of begging until our last breath. Divine transformation of life begins with conversion, but in the harshest demands of suffering can only be fulfilled in our submission to the Will and Purpose of God alone. Our souls are crushed by God to release us from the horrible hold of slavery to pride that will never allow the circle of pain and suffering, violence and destruction to be broken. As the sun rises and sets, so, too, does God demand the whole of us and not a part of us. Such is the moment, the moment of our choosing, when we rise from our knees before the Cross and step through the Cross—walking as dead men in the flesh, but living only on the Divine Breath of God’s Holy Spirit. Those who have walked that step through the Cross say with the certainty of St. Paul, **“The glory is as sure as the suffering.”**

When we reach home we shall see far more clearly than we ever see in this dark and cloudy world. Those who know “The glory is as sure as the suffering,” know this world is not our true home, but a sojourner’s home on the Pilgrim’s Way to an everlasting and eternal home. We shall be thankful for a thousand things that here we utterly fail to understand. I sometimes think that, blended with our gratitude for all the goodness and mercy that have followed us, there will be a great thankfulness (knowing as we are known) for all our prayers down here that were refused. +

## Prayers that are Refused

timeless  
truths  
for  
turbulent  
times



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