

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Taught to Pray

Why Prayer Rests on God's Promise, Not on the One Who Prays

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CHAPTER ONE

Talking to the Ceiling

THE ROOM GOES QUIET

It is late. The house is still. You have finally sat down to pray, the way you keep promising yourself you will.

You begin well enough. You thank God for the day. You mention the people you said you would pray for. You bring up the thing that has been sitting on your chest all week: the test results, the son who stopped calling, the money that will not stretch to the end of the month.

Then you wait. You are not sure what you are waiting for, exactly. A sense of peace, maybe. A warmth. A thought that seems to come from outside yourself. Something that tells you the words went somewhere.

Nothing comes. The furnace kicks on. A car passes outside. Your mind drifts to tomorrow's schedule, and you drag it back, and it drifts again. After a while you say "Amen" more out of embarrassment than confidence, and you go to bed with a feeling you have had many times before. It felt like talking to the ceiling.

If you have never had a night like that, this book may not be for you. But I suspect you have. Most Christians have, and most of them have never told anyone. They assume everyone else at church prays with a clear sense of God's nearness. They assume the silence is unusual. They assume the problem is them.

This chapter is about that assumption. The rest of the book is about why it is wrong.

THE VERDICT WE PASS ON OURSELVES

When prayer feels empty, the mind looks for a reason. It rarely looks far. The reason it settles on is almost always the one praying.

The conclusions come in a few familiar forms. *I must not have enough faith. There is some sin I have not dealt with. Other people are close to God, and I am not. If I really meant it, I would feel something. Maybe I am not even a Christian.*

None of these is usually spoken aloud. They sit under the surface, and they do their work quietly. A person who believes he is bad at prayer begins to pray less, because each attempt confirms the verdict. Praying less makes him feel more distant, and the dis-

tance seems to prove the verdict again. The circle closes. Before long prayer is not a comfort at all. It is a test he keeps failing.

Notice what has happened. Prayer was given to Christians as a gift, a way to call on a Father who has promised to listen. Somewhere along the way it became a report card. And the grade on the card is based almost entirely on how the praying felt.

That is a heavy thing to carry. It is heavier still for the people who already carry the most. The widow who cannot find words. The man whose depression flattens every feeling, including the religious ones. The mother of a sick child who has prayed the same prayer a hundred times and watched nothing change. The new believer who was told prayer is “just talking to God like a friend” and cannot understand why the friend never talks back.

These are not weak Christians who need to try harder. Many of them are Christians who were handed a burden God never placed on them.

WHERE THE BURDEN COMES FROM

No one sets out to load the conscience this way. The burden usually arrives through ideas that sound devout, even warm. Three of them do most of the damage.

Prayer as a measure of closeness. We hear about a “prayer life” the way we hear about a diet or an exercise plan. It can be strong or weak, consistent or neglected, growing or stalled. Sermons and small groups ask, kindly enough, “How is your prayer life?” The question assumes there is a thing to be measured, and that the measurement tells you something about where you stand with God. A full prayer journal looks like nearness. An empty one looks like drift. But Scripture never tells us to read our standing with God off our own devotional habits. It tells us to look to Christ, crucified and risen for us.

Prayer as the place God speaks. Many Christians have been taught that prayer is a two-way conversation, and that the second half of the conversation happens inside. You speak, and then you listen for impressions, nudges, a still small voice. If you are quiet enough and sincere enough, God will tell you things. When nothing comes, the fault must lie with the listener. We will take this idea apart carefully in Chapter 3. For now, notice only where it sends the troubled heart: inward, to search its own thoughts for a word from God, and then to judge itself when it cannot find one.

Prayer as a matter of fervor. Some teaching suggests that prayers are heard in proportion to how hard they are prayed. Pray longer. Pray with more feeling. Pray with

more people. Pray the right formula, or claim the promise in the right words. Then, if the answer does not come, the prayer was not fervent enough or the faith behind it was not strong enough. The result is a believer who watches his own intensity the way a nervous driver watches the fuel gauge.

Each of these ideas does the same thing. It moves the confidence of prayer off God and onto the one who prays. It makes your feelings, your listening, or your effort the thing that decides whether prayer “works.” And because your feelings, your listening, and your effort are never as strong as they should be, the burden never lifts.

THREE WHO STOPPED PRAYING

It may help to put faces on these ideas. The three people below are composites, drawn from many conversations over many years. Their names and details are changed. But if you have spent much time in a congregation, you have met them, and you may be one of them.

Kayla is thirty-one, with two children under five. A few years ago she joined a women’s Bible study at a large church across town, and the study came with a prayer journal. Each page had a box for the date, a box for “What I heard from God,” and a box for “Minutes spent in prayer.” For the first month she filled it faithfully. She got up before the children, made coffee, and sat at the kitchen table with her Bible and her pen.

Then the baby stopped sleeping through the night. Some mornings Kayla did not get to the table at all. Other mornings she sat down, opened the journal, and fell asleep over it. The boxes stayed empty. When the group met on Thursdays and the leader asked, warmly, how everyone’s time with the Lord was going, Kayla smiled and said it was going fine. Then she drove home feeling like a fraud.

What Kayla came to believe, without ever saying it, was that God was further away than He used to be. The journal said so. Fewer minutes, fewer words from God, less closeness. She did not stop believing. She stopped praying, because every attempt reminded her of how far behind she had fallen.

Mark is fifty-four, an electrician, and a deacon in a small congregation. Two winters ago he went through a long stretch of depression. It came on slowly. Food lost its taste. He stopped calling his brother. He went to work and came home and sat in front of the television until he could go to bed.

Mark had been taught that prayer was a conversation, and that if he waited quietly after he prayed, God would answer him inwardly with a sense of peace or a word of dir-

ection. For years he had felt something like that, or thought he had. Now he felt nothing at all. Not in prayer, not in church, not anywhere. He would pray and wait, and the silence was so complete that he began to wonder whether there had ever been anyone listening. *If God were really there, he thought, I would know it. I used to know it.*

What Mark did not know was that his depression had flattened every feeling he had, not only his religious ones. He did not know that the silence said nothing about God and a great deal about his illness. He only knew that the voice had stopped, and he took it as a verdict.

Ruth is seventy-eight. She and her husband, Walt, prayed together at the supper table every night for forty-eight years. When Walt was diagnosed with cancer, her church's prayer chain went to work. A friend gave her a book about claiming God's healing promises. Someone at a healing service told her that if she prayed in faith, without doubting, Walt would recover. She tried. She prayed out loud, with her eyes shut tight, trying to push every doubt out of her mind. Walt died eleven months later.

Ruth still goes to church. She still sings the hymns. But she has not prayed aloud since the funeral. When she tries, she hears the voice from the healing service, and she thinks: *I did not believe enough. If I had, he would still be here.* Better, she has decided, not to pray at all than to fail at it again.

Look at these three side by side. Kayla believes her prayer measures her closeness to God. Mark believes prayer is the place where God speaks, and that silence means absence. Ruth believes the answer to her prayer depended on how fervently she prayed it. Three different burdens. One shared conclusion: *the problem is me.*

None of them is a weak Christian. Kayla is a tired mother doing her best. Mark is a faithful man walking through an illness. Ruth is a widow who loved her husband and prayed for him with everything she had. Each of them was given an idea about prayer that sounded devout, and each idea quietly moved the weight of prayer off God and onto them.

Pastors meet people like these three every week, though they rarely hear the whole story. The confession usually comes sideways. *I'm not much of a pray-er, Pastor. I should probably be praying more. I used to be closer to the Lord than I am now.* The words are mild, but behind them is often years of quiet self-accusation. Many of these Christians have never told anyone how long it has been since they prayed with any confidence at all. They are embarrassed, and they assume the fix is more effort.

If that describes you, it may help to know how ordinary it is. You are not the only one in the pew who has stopped praying, or who prays only out of habit and expects nothing from it. You are not the only one who reads devotional books about intimacy with God and closes them feeling further away. And you are not the only one who has wondered, at least once, whether the whole thing was ever real.

We will come back to these three as the book goes on. For now, notice what none of them needs. Kayla does not need a better journal. Mark does not need to listen harder. Ruth does not need to be told she should have believed more. What each of them needs is to hear where prayer actually stands, and on whose shoulders it actually rests.

LORD, TEACH US

There is a better place to stand, and the disciples found it by asking a simple question.

They had watched Jesus pray. They had seen Him slip away before dawn and come back from the hills. One day, when He had finished, one of them said, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1).

It is worth noticing what they did not say. They did not ask Jesus to make them feel closer to God. They did not ask Him for a technique to quiet their minds, or for a way to know when the Father was speaking back. They admitted they did not know how, and they asked to be taught.

And Jesus did not answer with a method. He answered with words: “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:2-3). He put a prayer into their mouths. Then He told them about a friend who knocks at midnight, and a father who would never hand his son a serpent instead of a fish, and He ended with a promise: “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

That is the shape of everything this book will say. Prayer does not rest on you. It rests on three things outside you.

- **God commands it.** You do not pray because you feel worthy or close or spiritual. You pray because your Lord told you to. His command is reason enough, on good days and on empty ones.
- **God promises to hear it.** “Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (John 16:23). The prayer is heard for Christ’s sake. A weak Christian’s stammer reaches the Father on exactly the same ground as a strong Christian’s eloquence.

- **God gives the words.** In the Lord's Prayer and in the Psalms, God hands His children the very sentences He wants to hear from them. You are not required to compose something worthy. You are invited to say back what He has already said.

Martin Luther built his teaching on prayer on these same foundations. In the Large Catechism he grounds prayer first in God's command, then in His promise, and then in the fact that God Himself sets the words before us (LC III). He knew the anxious heart that says, *Who am I to pray?* His answer was never, *Try harder*. It was, *God has told you to, and God has promised to hear*.

There is one more thing to get straight before we go on, and it matters more than it first appears. Prayer is not the way God speaks to us. God speaks to us in His Word and in the sacraments, from outside us, in words we can hear and promises we can hold. Prayer is the other direction. It is faith answering what God has already said. When those two directions get confused, prayer is asked to carry a weight it was never built to bear.

THE ROAD AHEAD

This book will not give you a better technique. It will not promise that if you follow its steps your prayers will feel fuller or your answers come faster. Books like that already exist, and many readers of this one have tried them. They tend to add weight rather than remove it.

What this book will do is move the weight to where it belongs.

Part One, What Prayer Is Not, clears the ground. We will look at which way the words run between God and His people, at the expectation of an inner voice, and at the fleeces, formulas, and fervor that promise a hearing in exchange for effort. Some of this will feel like taking things away. It is. You cannot set a burden down while you are still holding it.

Part Two, Why We Dare to Pray, lays the foundation: God's command, God's promise, and the words God gives. These three chapters are the heart of the book. If you read nothing else, read them.

Part Three, The Prayer He Taught, walks slowly through the Lord's Prayer, petition by petition, with Luther's Small Catechism as our guide. Many Christians have prayed these words thousands of times without ever being shown how much they hold. They are not a warm-up before the real praying starts. They are the real praying.

Part Four, Praying in the Dark, is written for the nights when nothing seems to answer. We will sit with the Psalms that complain, with Job, with Paul's thorn, and with

Jesus in Gethsemane. We will learn that lament is faith, that silence is not abandonment, and that when the Father says no, He is still the Father, and He is still answering. We will end where every Christian's prayer ends up: not alone, but in the company of the whole church, praying the prayers it has always prayed.

Two short appendices close the book. One summarizes Luther's simple way of praying through the catechism for daily use. The other is an index of Psalms for particular hours: fear, grief, guilt, illness, sleeplessness, and thanks.

IF YOU ARE THERE TONIGHT

Perhaps you picked up this book because the ceiling is all you have been hearing from lately. Perhaps you have quietly stopped praying, and you feel guilty about that too. I want to say a few things to you before we begin, and I want to say them plainly.

You are not the first. The psalmist asked, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1). That question is in the Bible. God put it there. He expected His people to need it.

Your prayer does not depend on what you feel while you pray it. A prayer prayed in numbness is heard for the same reason as a prayer prayed in joy: the name of Jesus, and the promise of the Father.

You do not even have to know what to say. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). The Christian who cannot find words is not outside God's care. He is precisely the one this verse was written for.

And if you have no words of your own tonight, you can borrow His. Say the Lord's Prayer, slowly. You do not have to feel it. You only have to say it, trusting that the One who taught it to you meant it when He said the Father would hear.

The ceiling is not the end of your prayer. It never was. Your words go where Christ has gone before them, and they are received for His sake.

That is where we begin.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Taught to Pray is the invitation it opens onto.

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