

### **Week 3: A theology of Prayer – “Tell me what your God look like, Celie.”**

What happens when we pray?

*Through the first 180 pages of Alice Walker’s novel, The Color Purple, Celie has been addressing her letters to God. Then, suddenly, she begins to address her letters to Nettie. She says, recounting her conversation with Shug, “I don’t write to God no more, I write to you. / What happened to God? ast Shug. / What that? I say.” Shocked, Celie explains to Shug why she now addresses Nettie directly instead of God. “Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.” Warned by Shug that God might hear her in her blasphemy, Celie answers, “Let ‘im hear me, I say. If he ever listen to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. / She talk and she talk, trying to budge me way from blasphemy. But I blaspheme much as I want to.... She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.... Then she say. Tell me what your God look like, Celie.”*

“My topic is Shug’s request to Celie: “Tell me what your God looks like,” when you pray. I begin with a simple assumption: our understanding and practice of prayer depend primarily on our image of God. My thesis is this: what we pray and how we pray depends on what we understand God to be and how we understand God to work in our world and in our lives.”

Tyron Inbody

#### **God as Santa Claus**

Let’s begin with an image of God to which none of us would admit but to which many are tempted to pray: God as Santa Claus.

The idea here is that God gives us what we ask – that God intervenes occasionally and directly in the world, setting aside the laws of physics if needed to respond to the cry of God’s people. Indeed, there is apparent Biblical justification for such prayer. Does Jesus not tell his disciples, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14)? Does James not assure his readers that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power” (Jas 5:16)?

Is this the image of the God to whom we pray when we hope our team will win the cup final, or that a certain question will be in the exam, or that the bus will not have left by the time we arrive? I pray, God delivers. Such prayer is often linked to the notion that a positive response from God is conditional on whether I have made the “naughty” list or the “nice” list. It is after all the prayer of the “righteous” rather than the unrighteous that “has great power.”

Such prayer imagines God as a benevolent Santa Claus handing out rewards for “niceness” and while it may be a common way to pray, it only takes a moments reflection to discern the theological poverty of such prayer. What happens, for example, when supporters of both teams are praying that their team should win? I have often wondered whether God is ever left in peace to simply enjoy a football match himself?

But, more seriously, what does such prayer imply about God's sovereignty? Does it not reduce God to the fickle servant of whoever happens to pray most fervently on a given day? Or, perhaps worse, it does away with a God of grace altogether since it is those who work hardest to be the most "righteous" who get what they want through prayer. And worst of all, what kind of cruel God intervenes to cure my head-cold while leaving thousands to suffer and die horrendous deaths in the Sudan, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere?

### **The Sovereign God: Prayer of Thanksgiving and Submission**

A more traditional view of God is as the all-powerful, all-seeing, unlimited, and unchanging God. According to this view, God's sovereignty means that God is "untouchable" by us mere humans. Nothing we can say or do has any power to change God's actions or intentions. All we can do is to thank God for God's provision, submit to God's will, and if possible allow our will to be bent to God's.

As we look on in wonder at God's goodness and mercy, this is an easy way to pray – thanksgiving and submission come naturally to us. But how do we pray to this God when things go wrong? Well, if we believe that God is infinitely powerful and infinitely good, then the only path open to us is to resign ourselves to the knowledge that for an all-powerful God nothing can go wrong. Things may just appear to have gone wrong from our perspective – but we, being limited creatures, don't have the full picture of God's 'Great Plan.' (Like a chess grand master who sacrifices a pawn to win the game, God knows the purpose of the suffering – though the pawn himself may feel hard done by.) We must trust that in God's infinite wisdom, God caused or permitted precisely this to happen for God's own mysterious but ultimately good purposes.

For many Christians, belief in such a God can be a great comfort and the source of great strength. It is reassuring to know that God is always in control, that his ways are deeper than our own, and we can persevere with great stamina in the face of adversity if we hold on to the hope that in the end, despite our present suffering, God's good and perfect purposes will prevail. You may recall Joni Eareckson, the girl who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident and wrote about her journey of faith. At one point she writes about her resignation to God's will as follows: "I was learning that there was nothing but unhappy frustration in trying to second-guess God's purposes.... God engineered circumstances. He used them to prove himself as well as my loyalty. Not everyone had this privilege.... I saw that my injury was not a tragedy but a gift God was using to help me conform to the image of Christ, something that would mean my ultimate satisfaction, happiness – even joy."

But a belief in an "untouchable", unchanging God is not without its problems – all the more so when we consider what it is that happens when we pray. If God cannot change, what happens when we pray? Proponents of this image of God, must resign themselves to the conclusion that all prayer (even prayer of petition and intercession) is merely intended to change the heart of the pray-er, for it can have no effect on God.

As powerful as this view of God may be, it does leave us with two rather perplexing questions. Firstly, as regards suffering, we are left to wonder just how much evil is permissible within the "ultimately good purposes" of God. I may console myself in knowing

that my torn Achilles tendon has the positive spin-off of forcing me into a period of quiet contemplation and solitude – ultimately good for my spiritual life. But what “ultimate good” could ever justify the horrors of the Holocaust or the suffering of innocents? Dostoevsky's character, Ivan Karamazov, wrestles with this question and concludes as follows, “If the suffering of little children is needed to complete the sum total of suffering required to pay for the truth, I don't want that truth, and I declare in advance that all the truth in the world is not worth the price!”

Secondly, as regards prayer, we are left to wonder what the point of prayer is. Yes, one may say that we pray asking God to change, all the while knowing that it is not God but us who will change. But is this honest prayer? And moreover is this truly how we pray when we are in need? Do we not cry out, “Dear God, Help!” And do we not hope that God will help? But if God cannot be changed or moved or persuaded – what's the point? As Walter Wink puts it, “Before an unchanging God, whose whole will was fixed from all eternity, intercession is ridiculous. There is no place for intercession with a God whose will is incapable of change.”

### **The Sovereign God: Prayer of Lament and Protest**

There is another form of prayer that helps us approach God when we're in crisis – a very Biblical prayer – but a form of prayer that is almost unheard of today. I am talking about prayers of lament and protest.

Let me start by pointing out that the modern understanding of God as all-powerful and unchanging has its roots in Greek philosophy and not in the Bible. For the Stoic philosophers these terms were metaphysical – they applied to the nature of God's being. God's power and changelessness were related to God's infinity of being. Their line of thinking was as follows: God is infinite being, therefore God cannot change. Because if God should change, God would no longer be infinite – and if God had changed, that would imply that there was a time when God was not infinite. Heady stuff!

Hebrew authors of the Bible were much more practical about the matter. Their concern was not metaphysical, they were concerned about relationship and salvation. For them, God's omnipotence (almighty power) meant just one thing: that God was always powerful enough to save them. And God's immutability (changelessness) meant only one thing: that God was always faithful in relationship (“his steadfast love endures forever”).

As a result, when the Biblical characters and authors had the feeling that God was not saving them, or they felt that God was not being faithful to God's nature (or Name) – they were quite comfortable with holding God to account. As the all-powerful one God must after all be the ultimate source of what we suffer. He must have either ordered or allowed it. So the Old Testament writers respond with complaint, weeping, protest – even anger – towards the God who has let them down.

In Lamentations (3:38) the question is raised, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?” The Psalmist (88:6-7) is direct in his accusation, “You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with your waves.” And Jeremiah (20:7) is downright angry when he shouts at God, “O Lord, you have enticed me; and I was enticed; you have overpowered me,

and you have prevailed. I have become a laughing stock all day long; everyone mocks me.”

Kathleen Farmer points out that up to a third of the Psalms contain prayers of anger, anguish, complaint, humiliation, pain and protest. Yet, she writes, “Those of us who have been taught to tiptoe quietly and to whisper politely in the presence of God, don't really know what to do with this large bulk of embarrassing material which has been preserved for us in the book of Psalms. In most Christian communities, the psalms of anger and pain have been virtually forgotten.” Christian pop singer, Bono, had this to say about the Psalms, “David was the first blues singer. As well as praising, he was there shouting at God – you know: 'Where are you when we need you?'...'We're surrounded.'...'Your people are starving.'...'Are you deaf?' That type of thing. He'd be wailing, this militant mind, this poet musician with enough faith to believe he had a deal with God...believed it enough to get angry when it looked like He wasn't coming through.”

Recapturing this very Biblical form of prayer – lament and protest – certainly has the power to save us from the trite “It’s all part of God's plan” response to suffering and for that reason alone it is worth pursuing. But even these prayers do not answer the second question I raised earlier: What's the point of intercessory prayer? Getting angry with God may be better than doleful resignation to God's will in that it helps us to get it all off our chests. But does it achieve anything? If what God has planned out cannot and does not change from everlasting to everlasting, why bother praying? Neither resignation nor protest will make any difference to the situation – we remain pawns in the Divine chess game.

### **The Incarnation of God and the Divinisation of Humanity: Prayer as Partnership and Participation**

But is God all-powerful and unchanging? And is our prayer simply a noiseless shouting at a brick wall?

The scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments, although they often portray God as almighty and unchanging, also present us with an alternative view of God – a God who responds to human beings, a God who answers prayers, a God who limits God’s own power, becoming human through the Son, Jesus Christ. A God whose steadfast love never changes; yet whose mercies are nevertheless new every morning (Lam 3:22-23).

Terrence Fretheim counts 40 occasions (not an insignificant number!) in the Old Testament where God changes God's mind or will. God regrets, is sorry, grieves, has compassion, retracts, changes mind and relents – all in response to the prayers of God's people. Abraham and Moses bargain with God, Jacob even wrestles with God!

The New Testament portrays a Trinitarian God, who not only enjoys dynamic, loving relationships within the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), but who through the incarnation of the Son also invites humanity to be part of those relationships. (This is the really mind-blowing bit: Because Jesus is forever Divine and Human, humanity has become eternally part of the Divine love affair and therefore also part of the Divine decision-making process!)

I want you to dwell for a moment on just how different this picture of God is. This is still a

God who is sovereign: We do not choose to limit God's power or to change God – God freely chooses to be limited by humanity and to be changed. But (and it is a big BUT), this is no God who stands aloof from our suffering, allowing the course of history to run down like a clockwork machine. This is God with us, Immanuel, participating fully in our experience and inviting us to participate fully in the Divine process of creating the future.

How does this God act in the world? Tyron Inbody concludes, “God does not intervene only occasionally, but always presents the possibility of transformation in every circumstance of suffering and evil.”

And this “possibility of transformation” is realised through prayers of petition and intercession. Inbody again: “In the presence of such a God, our prayers make a difference. Indeed, 'prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God.' Our petitions and intercessions become part of our work with God to change a world of injustice, suffering, and despair. Petitions and intercessions are not magic. We should not expect God to hold off rain for an afternoon at Wrigley Field, to provide the winning lottery ticket, or to sink the game-winning freethrow. But prayers of petition and intercession are part of the power of life-giving transformation that redeems what can be redeemed out of our pain and suffering, out of the present system of dominative violence, and makes the future a kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”

### **Trinitarian Prayer: Prayer as part of the Divine Conversation**

The final point I wish to make has to do with the recognition that God is Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Many of us, I'm afraid, tend to send prayers up to heaven without much thought to God as Trinity. I imagine us sending them up to a heavenly switchboard where we simply trust that St Peter will “put them through” to the relevant member of the Trinity. So what difference would it make if we prayed with greater consciousness of the Trinitarian nature of God?

Firstly, there is power in having a greater sense of clarity about the particular way in which we are relating to God in the moment of prayer. One of the virtues for us of the Trinitarian structure of God is that it allows us to relate to God in several ways. There are times when I need to relate to the strong, warm, parental and providential nature of God; other times when I need to chat to Jesus my heavenly Friend, or cry out to Jesus, the only One who can save me; or when I need to sense the indwelling power of God's Holy Spirit; and also times when I need to lose myself in the overarching Oneness or Unity of the Trinity.

Secondly, returning to the discussion above, by praying in and to God as Trinity, I am made conscious of the fact that my prayer does not start the conversation but merely joins in a conversation that is already alive among the persons of the Trinity. God is the primary prayerer. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he that searches people's hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”(Rom 8:26-27). So when we begin to pray we are simply joining a in a prayer that is already going on in us and in the world.