



Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life: Part I

This five-part prayer resource written by faculty, program directors, and leaders from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary community provides thoughtful essays on ways Christians can pray with people experiencing life's challenges.

Part I topics include:

- » Abuse Suffered (Physical and Emotional)
- » Anxiety
- » Depression
- » Discernment
- » Doubt and Uncertainty about Faith
- » Forgiveness
- » Illness and Healing



**PITTSBURGH
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

Dear Reader of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life,”

In a recent survey asking Pittsburgh Seminary alums to tell us what resources they would find helpful as they pursue their varied ministries, a request for a resource on prayer came to light—specifically, a resource giving guidance and thoughts on how to pray with and for congregants and others about difficulties that come up in the course of one’s life. Part I of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” is the first installment of a response to that request.

In this five-part resource you will hear from faculty, program directors, and leaders from the PTS community on topics ranging from Abuse Suffered to Doubt about Faith to Injustice to Family Problems to Sin, and much more.

These thoughtful essays do not give specific, “correct” answers on how all Christians should pray with people in such circumstances—the particular guidance given on approaching prayer depends upon the giver’s theological perspective, Christian tradition, personal experience, and more. In fact, precisely because of the contributors’ diversity of approach, readers from a variety of viewpoints will be likely to find contributions that speak to their own needs for effective ministry.

These essays are aimed at helping Christian leaders—especially newer leaders—navigate theologically complicated issues with the people to whom they minister. The articles address topics by answering questions such as:

1. What is helpful to say/pray in this regard? What is unhelpful to say/pray, and why?
2. How can one incorporate Scripture in a prayer without becoming “preachy”—and what scriptures might one use with respect to the particular circumstance faced?
3. Are there specific liturgies or prayers (individual or corporate) that might be used or consulted regarding the given difficulty?
4. What books of prayers (or books on the topic of prayer) might one consult?

These thoughtful essays do not give specific, “correct” answers on how all Christians should pray with people in such circumstances . . . readers from a variety of viewpoints will be likely to find contributions that speak to their own needs for effective ministry.

Throughout this resource you’ll find a number of hyperlinked biblical passages. We encourage you to read these selections and consider how God’s word might further shape your care for others dealing with life’s challenges.

The Scripture quotations contained in the essays are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Part I of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” includes essays on the following topics:

- » **Abuse Suffered (Physical and Emotional)**
The Rev. Dr. Leanna K. Fuller, Associate Professor of Pastoral Care
- » **Anxiety**
Dr. Martha Robbins, Joan Marshall Associate Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care / Director of the Pneuma Institute
- » **Depression**
The Rev. Dr. Ron Cole-Turner, H. Parker Sharp Professor of Theology and Ethics
- » **Discernment**
The Rev. Dr. Cathy Brall, Director of Field Education
- » **Doubt and Uncertainty about Faith**
Dr. Tucker Ferda, Visiting Assistant Professor of New Testament
- » **Forgiveness**
Kimberly Gonxhe, Director of the Metro-Urban Institute
- » **Illness and Healing**
Dr. Martha Robbins, Joan Marshall Associate Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care / Director of the Pneuma Institute

As a seminary focused on preparing people for ministry in the way of Jesus, our hope at PTS is that this resource will help you think well for the work of helping bear the burdens of others.

ABUSE SUFFERED (PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL)

The Rev. Dr. Leanna K. Fuller, Associate Professor of Pastoral Care

Abuse of any kind is a profound violation of an individual's dignity and personhood. People who have suffered this kind of trauma may find it difficult to reconcile their experiences with their faith. For this reason, praying with a survivor of abuse requires special attentiveness and care. Although it is crucial to help those who have suffered abuse to find the psychological and emotional support they need from trained professionals, it is equally important to address survivors' spiritual needs, such as acceptance within the faith community and assurance of God's love.

People who have experienced abuse may carry with them a deep sense of shame, or even a fear that they may be "unlovable." One helpful approach for praying with such individuals may be to pray in ways that assure them they are cherished children of God, that God is present with them in their suffering, and that nothing can separate them from God's love. Some Scripture passages that might be helpful in this regard include Psalm 23, Psalm 46, Psalm 139, and Romans 8:37-39:

In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- » [Psalm 23](#)
- » [Psalm 46](#)
- » [Psalm 139](#)

Some survivors of abuse may also have strong feelings of anger or sadness about what they have been through. They may feel the need to lament, cry out, or even rail at God as a way of processing what has happened to them. Here again the Psalms may be particularly helpful, as they express such a wide range of human emotions. For example, Psalms 35, 69, and 77 may help give voice to the complex feelings of grief, rage, desperation, and hope that survivors of abuse may experience.

- » [Psalm 35](#)
- » [Psalm 69](#)
- » [Psalm 77](#)

Pastoral caregivers working with survivors of abuse should be very careful around the topic of forgiveness. Suggesting that a survivor pray to forgive his or her abuser could circumvent the healing process and/or reinforce feelings of guilt or shame if the person doesn't feel ready to forgive. Focusing too quickly on forgiveness might also send the message that the abuser's behavior wasn't that bad, or that the abuser should not be held accountable.

Similarly, when praying with survivors of abuse, it is important to be mindful of language related to suffering. Be careful not to pray in a way that suggests the suffering is deserved, or that God somehow engineered the suffering as a way of "teaching you a lesson." Such interpretations of suffering are usually not helpful and may actually make a survivor's feelings of despair even worse. Instead, other theological themes—such as the hope of the resurrection, God's abiding presence, or the goodness of God's creation—will likely feel more supportive to someone who has suffered the pain of abuse.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember if you are called upon to pray with a survivor of abuse is to be as fully present as you can, even if you feel anxious or uncomfortable. Try to listen to what the person is expressing without judging or attempting to "fix" the problem. Assure the person you're working with that he or she is a beloved child of God and that God does not wish for anyone to suffer in this way. Pray for healing and peace, and for the individual to sense God's presence even in the midst of very challenging circumstances. You might consider using a prayer such as this one:

Gracious God, we thank you for your deep, deep love for your whole creation, and for all your people, who are made in your image. This day, we pray especially for your beloved child, _____ (name). Help _____ (name) to sense your tender care, even in the midst of very difficult circumstances. With thanks for your abiding presence we pray. Amen.

Below are some additional resources for praying with persons who have suffered abuse:

- » "Prayers for Survivors: A Liturgy in Protest of Sexual Violence," from StrongWomenWrite: <https://strongwomenwrite.wordpress.com/tag/prayers-for-survivors-of-abuse/>;
- » "Prayer for Survivors," from *Survivor Today* online magazine: <https://survivortoday.org/2013/07/28/prayer-for-survivors/>;
- » "Prayer for Healing Victims of Abuse," from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prayer-for-healing-victims-of-abuse.cfm>; and
- » *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, by Elaine A. Heath (Brazos Press, 2011).

ANXIETY

Dr. Martha Robbins, Joan Marshall Associate Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care
Director of the Pneuma Institute

Recently I have been struck with the response people give me when I ask them, “What gift or blessing do you deeply desire God to give you?” Invariably, many of them respond with yearning for a kind of faith or trust in God that gives them some deep inner peace which is also manifested outwardly in their demeanor and behavior. The prevalence of this desire speaks to the increased levels of anxiety that many are experiencing as they struggle to keep up with the demands of everyday family life, job pressures, financial challenges, and health concerns in today’s divisive and rapidly changing technological, cultural, political, and religious contexts.

Anxious persons often experience restlessness, irritability, a sense of being overwhelmed most of the time, constant worrying about something, inability to focus, and sometimes increased heart rate, sweating, and difficulty breathing. Since anxiety involves physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of a person’s functioning, it is very difficult for an anxious individual to calm down. Many people in this state can and do call out to God for help when the anxiety waves toss them about at sea and threaten to overwhelm their little vessel (cf. Mark 4:35-41). But although they may believe Christ is with them, he seems asleep and appears as though he doesn’t notice or care. Hence it is not helpful for pastors or others to say at the outset to anxious persons such things as “calm down,” “stop worrying about it,” or “everything’s going to be okay,” for such statements may increase their anxiety by pointing out their inadequacy to “control” the symptoms of their anxiety at that moment.

» [Mark 4:35-41](#)

The same outcome may also ensue if the spiritual supporter starts by citing certain texts from Scripture, such as Jesus’ statement in Matthew and Luke, “do not worry about your life” and his statement in John, “do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” Such quotations, even if meant to encourage, may trigger a sense of doubt in God’s promises or a sense of failure to trust God.

When anxiety escalates, it is helpful first to acknowledge compassionately that anxiety is a source of great suffering so the anxious person has a sense that you understand and are with him or her. Then invite the person to join you in a particular kind of prayer, called Breath Prayer. This kind of prayer is very simple and effective in calming the nervous system and creating a sense of spaciousness in the brain and heart so that, then and there, the person may be more ready to receive the efficacious word of God. Here is a way that I would lead such a prayer:

We begin our prayer in the name of God, who gives us life at this very moment;

in the name of Jesus Christ, who embraces our wounds and restores us to wholeness;

in the name of the Holy Spirit, who breathes Christ’s gift of peace in us....

[Speak in a calm and steady voice matching the breath of the person.]

I invite you now to

Take in a slow, deep breath,

Notice the breath entering your nose,

Feel the coolness touch the back of the throat,

Feel the rise in your belly, lungs, chest....

Gently, slowly exhale,

Noticing your shoulders falling away from your ears,

Descending through your chest, lungs, belly....

Take in another slow deep breath,

Feel the rise in your belly, lungs, and chest

As they fill with this life force we call breath,

The breath of the Living God, God’s Ruah;

Slowly exhale, allowing the breath of God’s life

To fill every cell of your being....

[Here one could slowly read Mark 4:35-39:

“On that day, when evening had come, he said to them,

‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd

behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.

Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the

waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being

swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion;
and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not
care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the
wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind
ceased, and there was a dead calm,"
ending with Jesus' words, "Quiet now, be calm"
and then continue with the following:]

*Take in another slow deep breath,
Opening to receive the breath of Christ's Spirit,
Filling your chest, lungs, and heart with Christ's peace;
"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" [John 14:27].
Slowly exhale, allowing Christ's peace
To fill every cell of your being.*

*And for this moment and beyond
There's space in your brain,
And Christ's gift of peace in your heart.
Glory be to God, whose power working in us
Can do infinitely more that we can ask or even imagine
[Ephesians 3:20];
All glory and praise be to you, O God. Amen.*

After allowing the person to share anything he or she wishes
after that guided-prayer experience, you might encourage the
person to do short breath prayers throughout the day. Advise
him or her to follow the rhythm of the inhale and exhale
of breath—for example, on the inhale say or think, "My
peace I give to you," and on the exhale, "My peace I leave
with you." Such repetition reinforces the "calming" effect
of Breath Prayer and the deeper rooting of Christ's words in
one's mind and heart.

(A helpful suggestion: try leading this prayer with a friend
before doing so with someone caught in the grip of anxiety.)

DEPRESSION

The Rev. Dr. Ron Cole-Turner, H. Parker Sharp Professor of Theology and Ethics

Christ our Intercessor is praying now for us all, and in his prayers we can offer our own, thus sharing in the Christ-like work of lifting others up before God.

If your prayer list has more than a few names on it, chances are that you are lifting up someone who suffers with depression. And if you do not know depression first hand, you may wonder how to pray with and for someone who does.

It's easy to think, "Well, I will just pray that the depression disappears. Maybe if enough people pray, our prayers will make it go away." It's good to remind ourselves that prayer isn't some magical power or magician's wand. If it were a magical power, we would use it to whisk away all our fears, calm every anxiety, and drive away all the inner demons of hopelessness and despair. But deep down, we know that prayer is not a magic trick that makes things disappear.

Prayer is much more powerful than that. It doesn't make bad things go away—it brings God close, even when our lives are full of bad things. It helps make God visible in our lives, even when the clouds within hide God from our view.

Prayer is also powerful because it brings the one who prays—you, in this case—close to the one with and for whom you pray. It connects you at the deepest possible level. Even so, if you've never been depressed, you may have trouble really understanding depression. Let's not let that be an obstacle to praying for a friend who is depressed. Through the extraordinary spiritual power of prayer, you enter empathetically into the heart and mind of one who suffers, thus feeling what it is like to be that person at the very core of your own being. To pray for another is to enter, insofar as it is humanly possible, into what it is like to be him or her. When you pray for someone, over time you begin to understand that person better.

Christ intercedes for us because he first became one of us. In Hebrews 4:15 we read: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we

are, yet without sin." Knowing that Christ our Intercessor understands the full gamut of human experience from the inside, we can bring anything to God through Christ. And so the Epistle continues in verse 16: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

And so we approach and boldly speak to God about the depression that is so much a part of the life of our friend. How do we describe it? Usually we speak in metaphors. Depression is darkness, we say, not a darkness that surrounds us but one that is in us, darkening everything else from the inside out. It is not the calm darkness that evening brings, or the startling darkness of lights going out in a storm, but a deep and paralyzing darkness brooding within, a darkness without dawn, the kind that no external light can brighten. We speak of depression as dryness, or sometimes as an emptiness within. "I feel immobilized, suspended in time while everyone else goes on with life," a friend explains. Others describe it as being lost in a mist, unable to move because they cannot see themselves entering safely into the next moment or the next day. And perhaps the most common metaphor is the simple but frightening word "down." It is as though the self cannot arise within and summon up its own energy. It is down, under water, under a weight that will not go away.

Never should we think that there is any sort of spiritual advantage in being depressed. And yet the defining truth of our faith is that God meets us at the extremities. If it is possible to be too rich to enter the kingdom, perhaps it is also possible to be too happy, if by happy we mean the silly optimism so many endorse today. Where is the thirst that makes us pant for God? Where is the emptiness that opens an aching space within—a space that only God can fill? When do we feel the immobility known by the one who waited a lifetime by the pool for angels to create healing ripples in the water, and so met Jesus? When is the darkness so dark that it becomes luminous, full of an awesome glory under the sign of its opposite? Those who are depressed know about these things.

One popular Taizé chant begins this way: “Within our darkest night, you kindle the fire that never dies away, that never dies away.” Pray patiently, joining in the endless prayer of our risen Savior, with and for those who know the darkest night. You might consider using the prayer below in walking alongside a person suffering from depression:

Holy God, who in Jesus Christ comes into our world to be the Light that no darkness can overcome, I pray now in this moment for my friend, _____ (name). You alone know the inner mysteries of our human minds, so often filled with negative thoughts and unrelenting anxiety. Through the healing power of our Savior, Jesus Christ, grant relief from depression and all despair for _____ (name). Give her/him that peace that passes all understanding, through Christ I pray. Amen.

DISCERNMENT

The Rev. Dr. Cathy Brall, Director of Field Education

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood (“The Road Not Taken,” Robert Frost).

“For to me, life is Christ, and death gain; but what if my living on in the body may serve some good purpose? Which then am I to choose?” (Phil 1:21-22).

“Pastor, I’ve got to choose between A, B, and C for my next (job, house, school for my child, etc.)—can you help me decide what is best?” Or “Pastor, can I meet with you to talk about what God wants me to do about XYZ situation?” Requests such as these are calls for discernment, for helping someone or a group of people—or perhaps even our own self—find the guidance or direction needed to make a godly choice. Even people who generally have a less-than-robust prayer life are willing to talk with God when faced with a difficult or weighty decision. Sometimes they choose to seek advice with someone they view as God’s representative—a minister, church-going relative, or wise and trusted friend. The process becomes discernment when it includes conversations (prayer) with God and others in order to seek God’s will and perspective on the situation at hand.

Several years ago a friend recommended *In Search of Guidance*, by Dallas Willard—the first book that I read on the topic of discernment. A revised edition was published under its current title, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, which highlights the importance of both conversation and relationship in seeking discernment. It’s a book that I still treasure, re-read from time to time, and frequently recommend to others. This book helped me understand that God wants us to know God’s will for our lives and that God isn’t interested in playing hide-and-seek games with us or waiting until we’ve reached some high level of spiritual attainment near sainthood to let us in on God’s direction. Similarly in a sense to our experiences with healthy and life-giving human relationships, God desires that as we grow in relationship with Christ, we become mature people who naturally perceive and desire what would be pleasing and glorifying to God in our actions, attitudes, and choices.

As we grow in our knowledge and love of God, we become better discerners.

In the preface to his book, Willard describes a picture of his children happily playing in the yard and writes that he didn’t have a particular preference for any specific sort of play they might undertake. As long as his kids were engaged in any of a number of acceptable options, they were completely within their father’s will. Willard then comments, “Generally speaking we are in God’s will whenever we are leading the kind of life he wants for us. And that leaves a lot of room for initiative on our part, which is essential: our individual initiatives are central to his will for us” (Willard, *Hearing God* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999], 11).

I have repeatedly found this comment helpful because there are times when we struggle to come to a definitive answer or the one, right (and often implied perfect) decision or choice, when God may, in fact, not have a preference for a specific option among a group of equally good possibilities. There may be two or more good choices. Practically speaking, each of these possibilities offers us a different path with varying circumstances, blessings, and challenges that will present unique opportunities for nurturing our relationship with God and helping us to mature spiritually. For example, choosing one particular job or house over the other acceptable options may open a door to a particular set of people and circumstances that will provide opportunities for us to grow in patience and generosity. Choosing another equally good job or house may lead to a different door or path to grow in these same virtues—or perhaps other virtues entirely.

God’s concern is that our choices would continue to allow for growth in our relationship with God (knowing and loving God more deeply/fully/experientially) and that our character would more closely resemble that of Jesus were he to be living life’s path in our shoes. When others come to us seeking our help for discernment, we need to emphasize the importance of taking into account how one option might affect their relationship with God and opportunities for spiritual growth at least as much as the other, more easily

perceived pros and cons that folks tend to include in their decision-making processes.

Another book I've found very helpful toward understanding discernment is *Weeds Among the Wheat, Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet*, by Thomas Green, S.J., a noted Ignatian spiritual director and retreat leader. This book developed from a series of lectures and classes on discernment he taught to clergy, religious, and committed lay people on how to apply the "rules" developed in St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises to the issues of discernment that arise in the lives of all believers. Green describes discernment as an art and a gift: an art because "it is learned by doing, by trial and error. And it is a gift, not primarily the fruit of personal effort, but God's gift to those who love and are loved by him" (Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat* [Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1984], 22).

Both Willard and Green write about learning to distinguish between God's voice/direction and that of the conflicting false voices/direction of "the world, the flesh, and the devil" which make seeking after discernment necessary and, at times, difficult. Willard approaches the topic from a more evangelical, biblical direction, and his chapter "The Still Small Voice & Its Rivals" offers practical, grounded, and accessible teaching on recognizing the variety of ways in which God speaks. Green covers similar ground from an Ignatian perspective by concentrating more on the experiences of desolation and consolation that come from God's work in our lives. Both books are helpful for a pastor's formation and library.

I'll finish with a couple of practical remarks about discernment. First of all, over the years I've learned to hear God's voice in ways that generally remain consistent to my experience and relationship with God. I pay more notice when God catches my attention or communicates with me in ways that have been significant to my relationship with Christ. On the one hand I've had experiences in which I knew unmistakably that God had spoken or nudged me to make God's will and perspective known—almost always when I hadn't been actively seeking to hear from God. Conversely, at other times, no matter how hard I've tried or prayed, I haven't been able to make God speak or force God's will to be made explicitly known to me. Rarely does God let me know what's going to happen in the future. When God does disclose it to me, it may be so that I will be better able and prepared to serve others. Hearing from God and not hearing from God both tend to grow me in humility, strengthen my trust in God's providence, and build up my faith.

Lastly, God has at various times given me guidance or knowledge that I have no idea how to apply because the time to use it will come later. After making a sincere attempt to understand such revelation without any success, I've learned to put it aside, to continue walking my current path, and to wait patiently for God's further direction when the time

is right. All such things are part of the great adventure of walking with God through one's own life and in ministry alongside others.

This prayer of St. Richard of Chichester can be helpful to those struggling with discernment:

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Consider also this prayer of Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT FAITH

Dr. Tucker Ferda, Visiting Assistant Professor of New Testament

Trying to pray as, for, or with someone in the grips of uncertainty or lack of faith is a little like a modern poet's trying to compose a new piece in the "genteel lyricism" of the 19th-century masters. Jewish poet Joy Ladin has written about how much of modern poetic expression is a skeptical reaction to the tendency of earlier poets to speak in universalizing terms about our world with a perspective "from above," as it were.

The counter-reaction has produced what Allen Ginsburg called "the aesthetics of relative truth," whereby poets express "from below" individual perspectives, voices, and biographical anecdotes, while leaving unanswered—or even ridiculing—the larger question of truth. Entering the genre of prayer, especially as enshrined in our liturgies and collective Christian praxis, can ask skeptics to speak suddenly with a feigned surety, or at least with a voice that to their minds ignores deep doubts and uncertainties. How do we pray to God when it is in fact God, God's character, or God's involvement in the world that is the very thing in question?

We need to recognize at the outset that that question can stem from different places in the mind and heart. For some people, fleeting waves or prolonged states of doubt and uncertainty are primarily intellectual in nature and stem from encountering challenging perspectives in the classroom, in various forms of media, or in other persons. Such is common on college campuses today, as religious students increasingly find themselves ill equipped to respond to new viewpoints they perceive as contrary to their faith. At the other end of the spectrum, uncertainty and doubt may arise as one responds to difficult life experiences—especially suffering, tragedy, and disappointment—that force a person to rethink his or her cherished theological convictions.

In both the intellectual and the experiential—and all cases in between—it is important to remember that the words we choose to speak will not always be understood in the way we intend. So even when our prayers and words of advice are theologically sound and intellectually rich, and even when our encouragement stems from genuine good will, our words can still communicate an underlying impatience with another's

doubt and questioning. They may communicate, unhelpfully, our real hope that the difficulty will soon "end" and "things can get back to normal." I know from experience on the receiving end of such pastoral counsel that it is far more helpful—and surely more difficult—to begin with a ministry of presence and to practice a posture of listening. Our presence and our prayers should embody the truth that there is space in our tent to name difficulties honestly, and there is a language of lament to voice them.

Jesus himself embodied this truth in his last moments on the cross, and it may be particularly helpful to reflect on this episode and allow it to permeate our prayers. At the very climax of Jesus' earthly ministry, when he is doing precisely what he had set out to do, we observe in the cry of dereliction ("My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?") a profound encounter with doubt, uncertainty, and a sense of failure. Yet the cry of dereliction also shows that Jesus dealt with those realities at this harrowing moment by naming them and voicing them—with utter honesty—to God.

Indeed, there is a paradox here that should also characterize our prayers. Prayer at this moment is hardly a setting aside of intellectual and existential struggles to assume a confident and assertive voice "from above" that is alien to us. It is, rather, expressing that very struggle to God, just as Jesus does on the cross. Importantly, however, the expression of that struggle is directed toward God in words of desperation, as Jesus cites an opening line of a Psalm of David: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" (Ps 22:1). There is, therefore, both here and in the Psalms of Lament (also a helpful resource) in general, a whole genre of speech that invites us to ask, to question, to challenge, and to give ourselves to God in the process.

- » [Book of Psalms](#)
- » Psalms of Individual Lament: 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, (27), 28, 31, (36), 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, (52), 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, (89), 120, 139, 141, 142
- » Psalms of Community Lament: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, (89), 90, 94, 123, 126, 129

Lord, we do not know what to pray, and we do not know what to make of you. We are like Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok, on the border of the promised land, looking in from the outside. But like Jacob in that pivotal moment, we will never stop wrestling with you. We cry out to you now from the place of our estrangement. Bring us home, we pray. Amen.

It can also be helpful to remind those struggling particularly with intellectual doubts and uncertainties that the modern understanding of “faith” has been essentially to reduce it to “belief.” The upshot is that, especially in a Protestant context, temporary or prolonged doubt can create tremendous anxiety. In the Bible, however—both Old and New Testaments—“faith” is much better understood as a disposition of trust in God that manifests in how we live. It may be helpful here to recall in our prayers biblical scenes that define “faith” better than our contemporary culture is wont to do. One such scene appears at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he calls four brothers to follow him. He does not give them a theology lesson at the first and ask them to sign on; he rather utters a call and invites them to take the risk of launching out to follow him. This following is what Jesus asks of us, too: he utters a call and invites us to respond in “faith”—trust manifested in life. “Faith” is not having utter certainty about the things of God, nor is it knowing all the answers to life’s difficult questions. Faith does not begin with understanding; rather, it “seeks understanding,” as St. Anselm so wisely put it. Our prayers can be acts of seeking understanding.

One final confession: I am sometimes tempted to frame my prayers as little apologetics lessons or theodicies. But then I recall the example of Christ in Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor*. How does he respond to the questioning of the priest who asserts—and sometimes with brilliant argumentation—that Christ was wrong to refuse the devil’s three temptations in the desert? We assume that Jesus has his superior reasons. But offering them is not what he does here. His response is far more mysterious and frankly more profound: he merely kisses the priest. The gesture points to a disarming love beyond words. It is an embodied prayer. Here the fruits of the Spirit—particularly peace and patience—are near to hand. Can we strive to make our prayers with and for others, especially those struggling with uncertainty and doubts about their faith, a kiss of that nature?

Those who would like to probe further here may benefit from reading: Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*; Mother Teresa, *Everything Starts from Prayer*; and Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. In the meantime, consider sharing this prayer with someone who is struggling with doubt and uncertainty about faith:

FORGIVENESS

Kimberly Gonxhe, Director of the Metro-Urban Institute

There are times when we desire to be forgiven and there are times when we need to forgive because we have been sinned against. In praying with and for someone experiencing the need for either—or both—of these acts, a number of passages from Scripture can give us guidance and wisdom in knowing what to say and how to pray.

Seeking forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts a person can give to another and to her- or himself, for it has the potential to restore relationship and unburden both parties. Admitting one's need for forgiveness—"admitting you were wrong"—is also one of the hardest acts. But the person who has knowingly offended another bears the responsibility of apologizing, whether or not that apology is fully received and forgiveness is given. Sometimes the offense is an infraction between just the individual and God. Such offenses, too, require the seeking of forgiveness, repentance, and changing one's course of action by rethinking how things should be done.

The following Scriptures will be helpful toward promoting healing and hope as you pray with and for someone who needs to seek forgiveness.

Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land (2 Chron 7:14).

Therefore if anyone be in Christ, (s)he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new (2 Cor 5:17).

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Consider sharing this simple prayer with the person seeking forgiveness, and offer the encouragement that God does not require of us a multiplicity of words, nor are many words necessary in humbly offering an apology to another person:

I am sorry. Show me how to do better next time. Give me the courage to make this situation right. Amen.

Depending on the seriousness of the offense from which a person is trying to recover, at the appropriate time in her or his healing process it may be important to suggest praying for the ability to forgive the offender—regardless of whether or not the offender has repented. The act of extending forgiveness is between the individual and God. It is a cleansing and unburdening of the forgiver's soul. It is the unraveling of hands and letting go. In order to progress in life by healthy means, the person who has been offended must, in time, let go of the control the offense has over her or him.

Since sometimes people are unable to grapple with offenses on their own, good counselors can help an offended person arrive at an emotionally healthy point to pray for the ability to forgive an offender. Sometimes encouraging the offended person to write down in a journal the name of the offender and what the offense may have been can be helpful in this process. Some people who practice such journaling also find it helpful to cross off the offense (or multiple offenses) as an outward demonstration of forgiveness—or even to burn the papers recording the painful event. For proper self-care, it is important consciously to acknowledge the offense as fully unacceptable and to establish healthy boundaries with the offender. At the right time, you might pray with the offended person that he or she will be able to forgive, learn any personal lessons, and then remember what she or he has learned through the difficult process.

The following Scriptures will be helpful toward promoting healing and hope as you pray with and for someone who needs to forgive another.

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, God will also forgive you (Matt 6:14).

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind

and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37).

Forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34).

Consider sharing this simple prayer with the hurting person who is seeking the ability to forgive an offender:

I am hurting, yet I release this offense against me. Help me to let go perpetually and to grow from this situation. Amen.

ILLNESS AND HEALING

Dr. Martha Robbins, Joan Marshall Associate Professor Emerita of Pastoral Care
Director of the Pneuma Institute

Healing in the biblical sense means to be restored to wholeness and thereby become a full participant in communal life, thus manifesting that the reign of God has come near. Jesus understood his mission as restoring humanity and all creation to the fullness of life: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b). God desires our abundant wholeness in all dimensions of life: physical, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual. As we open to and follow the life-giving way of Jesus as manifested in his life, death, and resurrection, we move toward the ever greater wholeness that God wants to give us individually and corporately. Likewise, when we move toward separation, loss of moral and spiritual integrity, or destruction, we know illness. The forces of life and death struggle within all of us individually and in our communities and in our nations. How then do we pray for healing?

There are many ways Christians pray for healing when we or our loved ones become afflicted with an illness that may be temporary, chronic, critical, and possibly final. Underlying any form of prayer for healing in the Gospels is the genuineness of the faith of the one asking for healing for oneself (e.g., blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; the leper in Luke 5:12-16; the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:25-35) or for another person (e.g., Jairus’s daughter in Matt 9:18-26; the Roman centurion’s servant in Luke 7:1-10; the paralytic in Luke 5:17-26). Three deeply interrelated components are involved in faith: *fides quae*, “faith that” is believed—the content of faith revealed through the sacred scriptures, expressed in doctrines and rituals held and taught by the Church; *fides qua*, the “faith by which” a person is empowered to respond to God and which includes the person’s understanding of self in relation to God, as well as her or his own filtered view of the content of faith; and *fideltas*, “faithfulness” in setting one’s heart on whom she or he has believed, due to the character, ability, strength, or truth of God and God’s promises.

- » [Mark 10:46-52](#)
- » [Luke 5:12-16](#)
- » [Mark 5:25-35](#)
- » [Matthew 9:18-26](#)

- » [Luke 7:1-10](#)
- » [Luke 5:17-26](#)

In my pastoral encounters with those who are dealing with chronic or serious illnesses, I engage them in simple conversation that explores three intersecting relationships: how they view their illness, how they describe their relationship to God and God’s relationship to them and their illness, and what it means for them to be healed or made whole. I listen for their particular ways of speaking of God, who God is for them, their beliefs and feelings about their illness, their desires for healing and wholeness. I listen for images and metaphors that may arise in the conversation. Then I wonder with them if God’s Spirit, whose power is at work in them, could be leading them to a deeper wholeness than they could possibly ask for or even imagine (cf. Eph 3:20: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine”). Whatever arises from this conversation gives me a way to pray for healing for and with them as I draw upon some of their God language, images, metaphors, and desires for wholeness—including the wholeness that is beyond what we can ask for or even imagine that God has promised to give to those who wholeheartedly entrust themselves and their concerns to God.

In a pastoral conversation I had with a woman who was fighting for her life as she dealt with a life-threatening diagnosis, she told me she felt as though she had entered a room that was totally dark. She could not see anything in the room, did not know where she was, and was afraid to take another step for fear there was no floor and she would fall into an abyss. I asked her whether she could imagine herself in that darkness lifting just one foot forward very carefully to see what would happen. After a long pause, she closed her eyes and gripped the arms of the chair to do just that—to see what would happen if, in her mind, she lifted that foot. As she engaged in this exercise, her face showed signs of struggle and then some release. She expressed surprise as she said, “the floor seemed to rise up to meet my foot.” After taking several more steps in her imagination, she reflected aloud, “So this is what faith really is: it’s trusting that God

will be there meeting me in every step, even though I cannot see the floor or know where I'm going!" This image and metaphor of faith arising out of our pastoral conversation became the focus of our prayer together:

Gracious God, you have shown us that even in the darkest of times, You are there meeting us precisely where we are most vulnerable. In Christ you have embraced our fear and suffering and empowered us to take one step at a time toward the wholeness that is deeper than what we can ask for or even imagine. May we proclaim the power of your Spirit at work in us, and hold fast to your gift of life given to us this day, for your glory. Amen.

SAMPLE PRAYERS

ABUSE

Gracious God, we thank you for your deep, deep love for your whole creation, and for all your people, who are made in your image. This day, we pray especially for your beloved child, _____ (name). Help _____ (name) to sense your tender care, even in the midst of very difficult circumstances. With thanks for your abiding presence we pray. Amen.

ANXIETY

We begin our prayer in the name of God, who gives us life at this very moment;
in the name of Jesus Christ, who embraces our wounds and restores us to wholeness;
in the name of the Holy Spirit, who breathes Christ's gift of peace in us....

[Speak in a calm and steady voice matching the breath of the person.]

I invite you now to
Take in a slow, deep breath,
Notice the breath entering your nose,
Feel the coolness touch the back of the throat,
Feel the rise in your belly, lungs, chest....
Gently, slowly exhale,
Noticing your shoulders falling away from your ears,
Descending through your chest, lungs, belly....

Take in another slow deep breath,
Feel the rise in your belly, lungs, and chest
As they fill with this life force we call breath,
The breath of the Living God, God's *Ruah*;
Slowly exhale, allowing the breath of God's life
To fill every cell of your being....

[Here one could slowly read Mark 4:35-39:

"On that day, when evening had come, he said to them,
'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd
behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.
Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the

waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm,"
ending with Jesus' words, "Quiet now, be calm"
and then continue with the following:]

Take in another slow deep breath,
Opening to receive the breath of Christ's Spirit,
Filling your chest, lungs, and heart with Christ's peace;
"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" [John 14:27].

Slowly exhale, allowing Christ's peace
To fill every cell of your being.

And for this moment and beyond
There's space in your brain,
And Christ's gift of peace in your heart.
Glory be to God, whose power working in us
Can do infinitely more that we can ask or even imagine
[Ephesians 3:20];
All glory and praise be to you, O God. Amen.

DEPRESSION

Holy God, who in Jesus Christ comes into our world to be the Light that no darkness can overcome, I pray now in this moment for my friend, _____ (name). You alone know the inner mysteries of our human minds, so often filled with negative thoughts and unrelenting anxiety. Through the healing power of our Savior, Jesus Christ, grant relief from depression and all despair for _____ (name). Give her/him that peace that passes all understanding, through Christ I pray. Amen.

DISCERNMENT

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen. (St. Richard of Chichester)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Thomas Merton)

DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT FAITH

Lord, we do not know what to pray, and we do not know what to make of you. We are like Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok, on the border of the promised land, looking in from the outside. But like Jacob in that pivotal moment, we will never stop wrestling with you. We cry out to you now from the place of our estrangement. Bring us home we pray. Amen.

FORGIVENESS

Lord God, we know that you do not require us to use many words in humbly asking for or offering forgiveness. Please help _____ (name) to be able to say, simply, "I am sorry," both to you and to the person (she or he) has wronged. Show _____ (name) how to do better next time. Give (him or her) the courage to make this situation right. And give _____ (name) the courage to admit, "I am hurting," yet also to release the offense against (her or him). Help _____ (name) to let go perpetually and to grow from this situation. Amen.

ILLNESS AND HEALING

Gracious God, you have shown us that even in the darkest of times, You are there meeting us precisely where we are most vulnerable. In Christ you have embraced our fear and suffering and empowered us to take one step at a time toward the wholeness that is deeper than what we can ask for or even imagine. May we proclaim the power of your Spirit at work in us, and hold fast to your gift of life given to us this day, for your glory. Amen.

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