



Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life: Part II

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 II topics include:

- » [Addiction and Substance Abuse](#)
- » [Anger and Violence](#)
- » [Bereavement](#)
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Dear Reader of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life,”

As a seminary focused on preparing people for ministry in the way of Jesus, our hope at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is that “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” will help you think well for the work of helping bear the burdens of others. The present installment represents Part II of this resource.

The essays that are included aim 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 II of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” includes essays on the following topics:

- » **Addiction and Substance Abuse**
The Rev. Dr. Canon Jay Geisler, Canon for Clergy and Chaplain to the Mon Valley Mission Initiative / Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Adjunct Professor
- » **Anger and Violence**
The Rev. Dr. Jerome Creach, Robert C. Holland Professor of Old Testament
- » **Bereavement**
The Rev. Dr. Steven S. Tuell, James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament
- » **Conflict and Control**
The Rev. Dr. Leanna K. Fuller, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care
- » **Discouragement**
The Rev. Carolyn Cranston, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations / Associate Pastor, Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church
- » **Mental Illness**
The Rev. Karen Rohrer, Director of the Church Planting Initiative
- » **Sin**
The Rev. Dr. John Burgess, James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology

ADDICTION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The Rev. Dr. Canon Jay Geisler, Canon for Clergy and Chaplain to the Mon Valley Mission Initiative
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Adjunct Professor

Addiction is a disease of the body, mind, and spirit. It is also America's leading killer when you consider smoking (nicotine) as a form of addiction leading to cancer and lung and heart disease. Overdoses of alcohol and drugs now comprise the leading cause of death for people under the age of 50. America is in an "addiction epidemic," as recognized by the Surgeon General and even declared by the President of the United States as a "national emergency." What are we as Christians to do to help those afflicted by this disease? We are called to love, to teach, and to heal!

What is addiction? The word addiction comes from classical Latin, with *ad* meaning "to" or "toward" and *dicere* meaning "to speak." According to Roman law, a person became an *addictus* when he/she was handed over formally in accordance with a judicial decision. In other words, when one becomes an addict, he/she is turned over to another power. The person addicted to alcohol and/or drugs has become controlled by the substance(s).

As a disease, addiction has symptoms, such as denial, obsession, and compulsion. In the process of denial, the addict loses touch with reality. The addicted person believes he/she is free to choose to use or not use alcohol or other drugs when, in fact, he/she has become enslaved to them and is therefore unable to choose freely. Obsession stems from the mental process that causes an addicted person to spend more and more of his/her mental energy thinking about and finding means to obtain the addicting substance(s). Addicted persons become preoccupied with "using" to the extent that their life becomes ever narrower as it centers increasingly on that goal and activity. Compulsion is the result of a person's using a chemical or substance—it starts a phenomenon of craving. As the ancient saying goes, "A man takes a drink; the drink takes a drink; the drink takes the man."

When working with and caring for addicted persons, we ourselves must realize that we are powerless over the process of addiction. We can help addicted people by sending them to detox to remove the toxin or poison from their body, thus addressing the physical aspect of addiction. But since

addiction is a disease of the body, mind, and spirit, we must also address the mental compulsion that leads people back to the poison once again. Therapy, support groups, and 12-Step programs are therefore essential to addicts' breaking out of the prison of isolation they find themselves in as their addiction grows and worsens.

Finally, the spiritual dimension of addiction must be addressed. As is often heard at 12-Step meetings, "If you are not praying, you are not staying!" Praying for and with the addicted person—and family members who have been affected by the disease of addiction—is the bedrock of recovery. Prayer is the beginning of hope. It is the foundation of spiritual rebirth. As Jesus declares in the Gospel of Matthew,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock (Matt 7:24-25).

The acrostic, mnemonic phrase DOCTOR can be a helpful tool when working with those who are addicted:

D = Denial
O = Obsession
C = Compulsion
T = Treatment
O = Ongoing
R = Recovery

Denial, obsession, and compulsion are the main symptoms of addiction we must help addicted persons see in themselves in order to help them find treatment and ongoing recovery. Like diabetes, for example, addiction is a lifelong illness that demands a change in lifestyle in order for the sufferer to become well—indeed, even to survive. Like evil, addiction does not simply vanish, never to return—as the Apostle Peter proclaims, "Be sober; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8).

A prayer that is often heard in 12-Step rooms is the shortened version of the Serenity Prayer. Recite and repeat this prayer often when you are working with and helping those who are addicted or affected by the ravages of addiction. Many people who know the shortened version of this prayer are unaware of the longer version (below), written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. May this prayer help you as you pray with people who are addicted—and, most of all, help the addicted persons themselves!

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
forever in the next.
Amen.*

ANGER AND VIOLENCE

The Rev. Dr. Jerome Creach, Robert C. Holland Professor of Old Testament

Anger and violence are among the most difficult problems for Christians to address in prayer. All of us have anger at wrongs done to us or at injustice we observe in the world. But by and large, Christian lessons on prayer do not include expressions of anger. Violence poses a similar, though more complicated problem when it comes to prayer. Violence is prevalent in our world, and it appears in many forms. It appears in warfare, murder, domestic abuse, and in more subtle forms of coercion.

Non-violence, however, is a prominent part of Christian tradition, and non-retaliation is a central part of Jesus' teachings. This posture is particularly true of the New Testament's instructions on praying for enemies. Christian prayer has been shaped largely by the Lord's Prayer, which asks that God would "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12). Jesus instructed his disciples directly to "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44), and his own example on the cross was to ask forgiveness for those who taunted and tortured him (Luke 23:34). The Apostle Paul echoes Jesus' teachings and holds up his practice as an example when he says, "Bless those who curse you" (Rom 12:14), and further, "Do not avenge yourselves" (Rom 12:19).

As prevalent as such teachings are, however, they are not Scripture's only perspective on anger and violence. If they were, then Christian prayer would lack vital resources to face violence and injustice. The simple injunction to forgive an enemy might alone seem encouragement to deny evil, thereby allowing it to go unchecked. It might also seem cruel to the person who suffers abuse. There is a place in Christian prayer to call for justice, to complain about present circumstances, and to petition God for right to prevail.

The primary models for such prayer appear in the Psalms. A majority of the Psalms are prayers for help, sometimes called laments. Some of these prayers are by individuals who are suffering abuse or injustice or who face dire circumstances (see Psalms 3, 9-10, 17, and 52 as examples). Other such

prayers are by communities when defeated and humiliated by enemies (see Psalms 44, 74, and 137).

- » [Psalm 3](#)
- » [Psalm 9](#)
- » [Psalm 10](#)
- » [Psalm 17](#)
- » [Psalm 52](#)
- » [Psalm 44](#)
- » [Psalm 74](#)
- » [Psalm 137](#)

The prayers for help in the Psalter may serve as examples and give language for prayer for people who are angry over some circumstance in their lives. They may also help mitigate the impulse to seek revenge on enemies. Here are a few suggestions for reading the Psalms of Lament as model prayers:

1. The prayers for help in the Psalter suggest that God is ready and willing to receive prayer expressed from the depths of the human soul (Psalm 130). Their inclusion means that God not only hears but also welcomes prayers which arise from anger and frustration.

- » [Psalm 130](#)

2. The one who prays should feel free not only to express anger but also to question God's attention, or inattention, to circumstances. Jesus is the primary model in this regard. Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus' praying the opening line of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34).

- » [Psalm 22](#)

3. It is important to recognize, however, that the prayers for help are not petty or personal. They typically deal with life-and-death matters and are not appropriate as models for praying about small slights and disputes. These psalms express anger over the presence and power of evil in the

world. They often complain of false witnesses (“Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me about things I do not know” [Ps 35:11]) or extreme injustice of a sort that many modern Western people never encounter (“. . . They sit in ambush in the villages; . . . they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; . . . they seize the poor and drag them off in their net . . .” [see Ps 10:7-11]). Of course, some Americans do face unfair treatment (for example, in the criminal justice system), and the Psalter’s prayers may apply directly to their situation. For many of us, however, an appropriate way to use these prayers as models is to practice praying on behalf of suffering and oppressed people in settings other than our own.

4. In the light of the last comment, we may read the prayers for help as pleas for God’s justice, like that which we find in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

5. One who reads the prayers for help will frequently find petitions for God to punish or even destroy an enemy. Sometimes the language is extreme, such as the language of Psalm 137 is. It is important to observe in such cases that the pray-er gives the anger to God and asks God to handle the matter, rather than the pray-er’s trying to claim that place for himself or herself.

With these points as guidelines, consider using this sample prayer with someone who is struggling with the issues of anger and violence:

O God, so much makes us angry, but so much of our anger is petty. We seethe when someone cuts us off in traffic. We boil inside when we learn someone has spoken ill of us. Redirect our anger toward what really matters. Help us to see the evil in the world and to direct our prayers toward those who suffer from it. Be with all the victims of abuse, those who live in places torn apart by war, and those whose lives are at risk because of disease, famine, and poverty. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

For more on how to read the prayers for help as resources for prayer, see the following:

- » Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1974.
- » Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
- » Creach, Jerome F. D. *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2008.

- » Creach, Jerome F. D. *Violence in Scripture. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013.
- » Zenger, Erich. *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.

BEREAVEMENT

The Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell, James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament

How we pray for and with those who grieve, and how we pray when we ourselves are grieving, are of course related. Our own grief enables us to empathize with the grief of others. Perhaps this is why John tells us that at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35, KJV). How, after all, could Scripture claim that Jesus “in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15), if our common human experience of grief was unknown to him? Why else would Isaiah’s Servant of the LORD empathize with the outcasts to the point of sharing their sufferings (Isa 50:4-6), to the point that the Servant could be called “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3 KJV)? So, too, we do no one any favors if in our prayers with and for the bereaved we pretend to an “elevated” spirituality in which grief has no place.

I vividly remember a courageous student who observed in a chapel sermon, “This is a very hard place to be if you are sad.” In our worshiping communities, people who are hurting or depressed are likely to be left alone. We avoid them out of helplessness rather than callousness, to be sure, because we do not know what to do or say, but the end is the same—those in grief are abandoned by us. Worse, people in grief may be jollied by us—told to cheer up and trust in Jesus, as though their sorrow and pain were somehow a denial of their faith. As Robert C. Holland Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Donald Gowan ruefully observes in *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk*, “Christian worship tends to be all triumph, all good news (even the confession of sin is not a very awesome experience because we know the assurance of pardon is coming; it’s printed in the bulletin). And what does that say to those who, at the moment, know nothing of triumph?” (p. 38).

The book of Psalms is called *Tehillim*, Hebrew for “Praises,” yet it contains more laments—cries for help out of pain and loss—than any other type of poem. Clearly, then, frank recognition of pain and loss plays a key role in biblical worship and prayer. As Walter Brueggemann writes in his article “The Costly Lament,” the loss of lament means “the loss of *genuine covenant interaction* because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless

or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology” (p. 60). By stifling lament in our worship—and in our own prayer life—we shut off the honest engagement that a living relationship with God presumes.

So, on the one hand, our prayers must always acknowledge our common grief and pain, never deny them. But on the other hand, we must be careful not to confuse our own grief with that of others. What helped me in my pain may be of no help at all to *you* in *your* pain. We must begin—and perhaps end—by *listening*. There is great wisdom in the initial response of Job’s friends to his anguish and loss: “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:13). Indeed, our presence will matter far more to those in grief than the profundity of our theology or the eloquence of our prayers. On page 13 of his article “Barely Enough: Manna in the Wilderness of Depression,” Frederick Niedner describes with simple eloquence the power of being present with the suffering:

In the empty wilderness of someone else’s darkness we have no cures or magic. By grace, however, we may be like the manna on the desert floor. God makes of our simple, steady acts of accompaniment a measure of ‘enough.’ Not much to look at, perhaps, and difficult to describe. But for today, enough.

In that spirit, below is a simple prayer that may be comforting to pray with a person experiencing bereavement:

Lord Jesus, you wept at the tomb of your friend Lazarus. You know our loss and pain from the inside. Be with your child _____ right now, we pray. Surround her/him with your love, undergird her/him with your peace and strength. Be very real to _____ in these days of grief, Abba, and grant that as she/he is able to hear the good news of Christ’s resurrection, it would fill her/him with hope. In the name the One who has “borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows,” amen.

» [Isaiah 53:4](#)

An excellent resource for prayers, Scriptures, and hymns for times of bereavement consists in "Services of Death and Resurrection," pages 139-71 in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

For an honest and deeply moving account of C. S. Lewis's own grief at the death of his wife, see his book *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury, 1961).

Bibliography for the books and articles cited above follows here:

- » Don Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), 38.
- » James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 21.
- » Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 60.
- » Frederick Niedner, "Barely Enough: Manna in the Wilderness of Depression," *Christian Century* Jan. 25 (2012): 11-13.

CONFLICT AND CONTROL

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

Conflict is a completely normal part of human relationships and communities. Because we are all unique individuals, representing different backgrounds, beliefs, and personalities, we will often have needs, desires, or goals that are different from the people with whom we are in relationship. These differences cannot always be easily reconciled; as a result, we may experience conflict with other people—even people for whom we care very much.

The pervasive reality of conflict in our lives, however, doesn't mean we feel comfortable with it. In fact, most people feel very uneasy around conflict, and when conflict arises in intimate relationships or in close-knit communities, such as church congregations, it can feel especially disconcerting. It can also be hard to know how to resolve conflict, particularly when the issues at stake are very important to all involved.

All these factors make it difficult to know how to pray with or for someone who is experiencing conflict. We often do not know all the details of the conflict, and we may only have one person's perspective on what is likely a complex situation. Still, because conflict often makes people anxious, and because some conflicts involve harmful words or behaviors, individuals and communities may feel a special need for support through prayer when they are encountering such struggles.

One fruitful avenue for prayer in this situation is to pray for God's will to be done. Although we often feel strongly that our own opinions are the "right" ones, the truth is that, because we are human, our perspectives are necessarily limited. We don't always know what the right course of action is, or in what direction God may be leading us as individuals or as communities of faith. For that reason, when we find ourselves in conflict with others, it can be important for us to acknowledge that we cannot control everything. Instead, we can ask God to accomplish God's will in the situation and to guide us toward the actions we need to take to help make God's will a reality. If you are having trouble finding words for such prayer, consider using the Lord's Prayer as a starting point, since it includes the petition, "Your

kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

Another helpful approach to prayer in situations of conflict could be to ask God to give us compassion for those with whom we disagree. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his disciples to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44). Admittedly, in cases of very intense conflict this instruction can sound like an extremely challenging task. But even if we cannot find a way to understand those with whom we are in conflict, we may find that praying for them and asking God to help us have compassion for them could begin to change the way we feel toward them. Over time, such praying could help us engage our conflicts with less defensiveness and more kindness, even if we still cannot find a way to come to agreement on every issue. In situations of conflict, it is tempting to try to change others so that they will agree with us. In truth, though, the only person we can change is ourselves—and praying for those with whom we are in conflict may be one way of doing that.

Finally, for communities of faith that are embroiled in conflict, praying for unity may be a fruitful avenue toward healing. It is important to note here that "unity" does not mean "sameness," and we should not be praying that others would simply come over to our point of view. Neither should prayers for unity serve as substitutes for working out our conflicts directly with others—that is, we should not expect prayer to be a "magic formula" that will suddenly dissolve all the tension in our relationships and communities. But if conflicted communities can find ways to pray together for unity even amid their differences, they may find new spiritual strength that can help them work on their problems together. One option would be for a community to reflect together on 1 Corinthians 12, which offers a beautiful image of the church as Christ's body, and use this passage as the basis for their prayers.

» [1 Corinthians 12](#)

If you are asked to pray with or for someone who is experiencing conflict, remember that you alone cannot solve the problem for that individual or faith community. What you can do, though, is offer spiritual support in the midst of a time that can feel very challenging or even hurtful. Praying for guidance, compassion, and unity may help people remember that God is with them and that God wishes to bring them to a place of healing and reconciliation.

A prayer such as the one below may bring calm to the person or community struggling through the storms of conflict and control:

Holy God, we thank you that you have created each one of us with unique gifts and callings. When we experience tension or pain because of our differences, grant us compassion for one another. Remind us that even when we disagree, we are united in our identity as your children and in the work to which you have called us. Help us now to discern your will and to follow where you lead—together. Amen.

DISCOURAGEMENT

The Rev. Carolyn Cranston, Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations
Associate Pastor, Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa 41:10).

Discouragement is a feeling that everyone experiences from time to time. Sometimes it may last for an hour, sometimes a day. Sometimes it lasts for weeks, and at other times it is a season of life. Everyone who feels discouraged has a personal experience that cannot be compared to that of another. Yet, whether it lasts for an hour or a much longer period, discouragement is an emotion that needs to be handled with empathy, caring, and prayer. If you are the one praying with or for someone who is discouraged, here are a few suggestions for reflection.

Discouragement comes in many different forms. It comes to the person who is dealing with a crumbling marriage and is unemployed; the person who is recovering from cancer only to find out that the cancer has recurred; the person who has helped a child go through the recovery process from drug abuse only to find out that the child is using again; the person who is adjusting to the loss of a loved one; or the pastor who is in the midst of controversy in the church to which he/she has been called.

Discouragement is no respecter of persons. When one finds life weighing him/her down, he/she is in need of conversation and prayer. So allow the person who is discouraged a chance to talk about what is happening and discuss the circumstances that he/she is going through. Being heard and knowing that someone is actively listening is of vital importance. Be an active listener! Make certain that you understand the difficulty and in conversation paraphrase your understanding of the problem back to the person. Refrain from offering solutions and refrain from judgment. That is not your role. Don't listen to respond—listen to hear.

When engaging in active listening, it is possible to pray for the actual concerns of the discouraged person. Lift that one up to God by name and circumstance. True, God already knows each of our needs, but prayer makes a difference. What is so important about prayer? In prayer we are praising,

thanksgiving, and glorifying God. Certainly, we can also pray for circumstances to be different. Most of all we are praying for change. We are not asking God to change—we are asking God to change us! Through prayer our attitudes, thoughts, and reactions to the situations in our life are changed. God changes our hearts through prayer.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

Help the discouraged person invite Jesus to indwell him/her. It is God's plan to live in our hearts. Richard J. Foster, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperCollins, 1992), talks about prayer as a means of being refreshed. Through prayer we learn to throw our arms up into the air and fall back into the ever-loving arms of God and trust that God will renew us day by day. In *Disappointment with God* (Zondervan, 1997), Philip Yancey writes, “The alternative to disappointment with God seems to be disappointment without God.” Both books are good resources for facing the issue of discouragement.

The uncertainty in all of life requires a resilient faith and total trust in the one true God, who sees the beautiful tapestry of our entire life, not just the messy spot where we are currently living. Encouraging a person's trust that God is faithful in all things can be a tremendous source of strength to the one

who is discouraged. Many passages of Scripture that relate to the topic of discouragement are helpful in nurturing such trust in God. Consider these two from 2 Corinthians: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (4:8-9); and ". . . for we walk by faith, not by sight" (5:7). See also these verses:

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all (Ps 34:17-19);

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds (Ps 147:3);

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved (Ps 55:22);

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits (Ps 103:2);

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isa 40:31);

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them (Isa 42:16);

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jer 29:11);

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28); and

My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:19).

A helpful resource of 10 prayers to address discouragement can be found at <http://www.beliefnet.com/ilovejesus/features/10-prayers-to-fight-discouragement.aspx?p=2>. One such prayer, based on Hebrews 4:10, is:

Oh Heavenly Father, though I am dealing with disappointment and obstacles, I rest in the fact that You are still on the throne. Lead me to enter into Your rest Oh Lord and not be disillusioned by the current circumstances; through Jesus Christ your benevolent Son our Lord, who

lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, in Oneness and power, now and forever. Amen.

As well, consider personalizing the following prayer in praying with a person struggling with discouragement:

Holy and most loving God, you know our every need, our every hurt, and our every pain. In times when we feel discouraged by the circumstances of life, provide us with strength, guidance, and wisdom. Remind us that you did not call us to be successful but to be faithful and trusting. I pray for my brother/sister _____ and ask that, as he/she deals with _____, he/she is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and knows the peace that comes only through being a beloved child of God. When words fail _____, give him/her your words that the light of Christ may overcome the darkness and joy will fill his/her heart. In the name of our risen and living Lord, Jesus the Christ, I pray. Amen.

MENTAL ILLNESS

The Rev. Karen Rohrer, Director of the Church Planting Initiative

Caring for and walking with those whose hurt we cannot heal is part of the call and regular work of the pastor. We as Christians do not worship a God of quick fixes—we confess a God who is with us despite and in the midst of suffering, so we cannot be afraid to name God’s presence even when things are difficult.

Mental Illness, from the minor to the severe, affects the people we serve, no matter what our context. How do we pray with and for them?

First, we cannot be afraid to name what so many other cultural forces invite us to ignore. Speaking of suicidal ideation, addiction, PTSD, depression, and other forms of mental illness is important in our worship spaces if we are honestly to invite people to bring their whole selves into community. Simply naming these realities as hurts and pains at work in the world goes a long way. Removing the blame from the conversation and, instead, acknowledging and seeking God as the source of hope and freedom invites people to speak of their pain without feeling they are blamed or at fault, unlike what so often happens in other spaces.

In the recovery process from mental illness, certain terms are often used in teaching individuals how they might work toward health. Familiarizing oneself with these terms, used by communities of mental-health providers, can go a long way toward writing and praying helpful prayers for those in the recovery process. Language such as “one day at a time,” “using your best thinking,” and praying for the “strength to do the work” can be constructive for people who are not sure whether they, in their experience as persons who are healing rather than healed, are welcome in the worship space.

In addition to being mindful of language, it is helpful for the one ministering to seek out prayers, poems, and first-person accounts that speak to the experience of those suffering from mental illness. Offering words to pray that feel honest and authentic can be a great gift to people who have been taught that their suffering and frustration are somehow wrong or are not the sort of issues they should bring before God and

the community. The Psalms are rich in such resources (see, for example, Psalms 88 and 139), as are the writings of the mystics—Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*, for example—and both types of resources can be adapted for liturgical use in prayers that focus on mental illness and community discipleship. For a more modern conversation, the book *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, by Kathryn Green-McCreight (Brazos, 2015), is a rich resource for those who are suffering from mental illness, for their caregivers, for the community, and for the minister/pastor. All these resources—the Psalms, the mystics, and Green-McCreight’s book—point us away from the dangerous notion that there is an easy answer to the issues involved in mental illness and recovering from it.

- » [Psalm 88](#)
- » [Psalm 139](#)

As we welcome those in our midst who are suffering, it is also important to consider the ways this welcoming might affect the rest of the community. Congregants learn from their leadership how to talk with those suffering from mental illness and how to pray for and engage the topic of mental illness. They also learn boundaries from their leadership. While ministers and pastors are called to care for and walk with those who suffer, we must also remember our call to the body as a whole. That call may require prohibiting certain behaviors and confronting individuals, even individuals who are suffering. In all this work, remembering and naming that God is God and we are not (in prayer and beyond prayer) allows us to care for those who suffer while also maintaining our focus on community discipleship and mutual support, rather than creating a pastor/savior complex in ourselves or teaching people who are suffering that nothing is expected of them in terms of community life and discipleship.

A prayer that recognizes the pain suffered in mental illness while at the same time holding hope in God might be:

God who goes with us, even into the depths, we have been afraid that our despair is too deep for grace and we have fallen too far from redemption. Our pain has disrupted our

best thinking, pulled us away from loved ones, and left us isolated from the understanding and compassion we crave. Even in community, we feel lonely and frightened. Holy Spirit, we find a companion as we pray with the psalmist, while trusting that even in our anger you have promised to meet us with love.

O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.

They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me.

You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness.

(Ps 88:14-18)

Loving God, we read in Scripture that "even the darkness is not dark to you." Recall to us your light, so that we might find our footing again. Amen.

SIN

The Rev. Dr. John Burgess, James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology

One of the most influential theologians of prayer was the early church father Origen. Born in Egypt, probably in Alexandria, in 185 AD, Origen was distinguished from an early age by a single-minded desire to know and serve God. He became known as “the man of steel” because of his extraordinary ascetical feats: walking barefoot, fasting, limiting his sleep, and renouncing his sexual desires. But for Origen, self-limitation was not a way to punish himself for sin; rather, it was a way to open up space to think and pray about divine things.

“Divine things.” In his famous treatise *On Prayer*, Origen argues that the most important thing for which we can pray is to contemplate God and to enter into His life. The things that ordinarily constitute the petitions of our prayers—worries about health, relationships, and worldly success—pull us away from God. When we pray for self-defined needs and wants, we are actually praying to ourselves, rather than to God.

Instead, says Origen, let us pray that “the kingdom of God . . . spring up in [us], bear fruit, and be rightly perfected.” Let us “peer beyond the created order, . . . gaze at the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, . . . [and] partake of the divine and intelligible radiance.” Origen goes so far as to ask that we be “nourished by God the Word, who was in the beginning with God, . . . [so that] we may be made divine.”

For Christians today, such prayer may seem like sheer spiritual escapism when what is needed, we believe, are prayers and interventions for a world that is all too broken and hurting. Rather than looking for a world beyond, we think that we should call on God to give us the strength to make this one—the one before our very eyes—better. In Lord’s Day worship, pastors lift up—perhaps by name—those who are struggling with cancer, grieving a loss, or longing for direction in life. We pray for justice and peace: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

But Origen is convinced that if we pray for heavenly things, God will provide for our mortal bodies as well. And if we draw closer to God, God will teach us that whatever earthly blessings we receive are but a foretaste of more amazing spiritual blessings he offers to us. Health and strength and daily bread—or their absence—can point us to a deeper, more enduring life, a life of trust in, and gratitude and praise for, the God to whom we belong in life and in death.

Origen himself would be martyred for his faith in 253. But he believed that “if all . . . [is] put in harmony by the Word of God . . . bodily sufferings [are] nothing but an insignificant scratch, indeed less than a scratch.”

Considering offering this simple prayer with and for a person struggling with sin:

O Lord, teach us again how to pray—not only for the things of this world, but also to contemplate your holy mystery that has come close to us in Jesus Christ. As we receive your blessings in this life, open us to life eternal. We pray in the name of the resurrected Savior. Amen.

SAMPLE PRAYERS

ADDICTION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
forever in the next. Amen.

ANGER AND VIOLENCE

O God, so much makes us angry, but so much of our anger is petty. We seethe when someone cuts us off in traffic. We boil inside when we learn someone has spoken ill of us. Redirect our anger toward what really matters. Help us to see the evil in the world and to direct our prayers toward those who suffer from it. Be with all the victims of abuse, those who live in places torn apart by war, and those whose lives are at risk because of disease, famine, and poverty. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

BEREAVEMENT

Lord Jesus, you wept at the tomb of your friend Lazarus. You know our loss and pain from the inside. Be with your child _____ right now, we pray. Surround her/him with your love, undergird her/him with your peace and strength. Be very real to _____ in these days of grief, Abba, and grant that as she/he is able to hear the good news of Christ's resurrection, it

would fill her/him with hope. In the name the One who has "borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows," amen.

CONTROL AND CONFLICT

Holy God, we thank you that you have created each one of us with unique gifts and callings. When we experience tension or pain because of our differences, grant us compassion for one another. Remind us that even when we disagree, we are united in our identity as your children and in the work to which you have called us. Help us now to discern your will and to follow where you lead—together. Amen.

DISCOURAGEMENT

Holy and most loving God, you know our every need, our every hurt, and our every pain. In times when we feel discouraged by the circumstances of life, provide us with strength, guidance, and wisdom. Remind us that you did not call us to be successful but to be faithful and trusting. I pray for my brother/sister _____ and ask that, as he/she deals with _____, he/she is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and knows the peace that comes only through being a beloved child of God. When words fail _____, give him/her your words that the light of Christ may overcome the darkness and joy will fill his/her heart. In the name of our risen and living Lord, Jesus the Christ, I pray. Amen.

MENTAL ILLNESS

God who goes with us, even into the depths, we have been afraid that our despair is too deep for grace and we have fallen too far from redemption. Our pain has disrupted our best thinking, pulled us away from loved ones, and left us isolated from the understanding and compassion we crave. Even in community, we feel lonely and frightened. Holy Spirit, we find a companion as we pray with the psalmist, while trusting that even in our anger you have promised to meet us with love.

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SIN

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