



Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life: Part IV

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 IV topics include:

- » Adoption
- » Dying without Knowing God
- » Family Problems
- » Internet Abuse
- » Personal Tragedy
- » Pregnancy Issues
- » Relationships Strained and Broken
- » Temptation



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

» **Adoption**

The Rev. Dr. B. Hunter Farrell, Director of the World Mission Initiative

» **Dying without Knowing God**

Dr. Edith Humphrey, William F. Orr Professor of New Testament

» **Family Problems**

The Rev. Dr. Christine Chakoian, Vice President for Seminary Advancement

» **Internet Abuse**

The Rev. Derek Davenport, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute and Digital Marketing Analyst

» **Personal Tragedy**

Dr. Ron Tappy, G. Albert Shoemaker Professor of Bible and Archaeology

» **Pregnancy Issues**

The Rev. Erin Davenport, MSW-LSW, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

» **Relationships Strained and Broken**

The Rev. Dr. Leanna Fuller, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care

» **Temptation**

The Rev. Dr. David Morse, Lecturer in United Methodist Studies

ADOPTION

The Rev. Dr. B. Hunter Farrell, Director of the World Mission Initiative

“(God) destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph 1:5-6).

Kinship by blood (my parents, children, siblings, cousins, etc.) and kinship by marriage (my spouse, in-laws, sisters-in-law, etc.) form the warp and woof of the basic unit of human society, the family. Around the world, every society has developed an intricate system of rules and customs to govern questions of lineage (“To whom am I related?”), inheritance (“Who will care for my children and my possessions after I die?”), marriage (“What rights and obligations do I acquire by publicly binding myself to my partner?”), and other such questions.

But in this sea of rules, there is an exception: adoption (from the Latin *ad-* [toward] and *-option* [choice]). Breaking with the regular rules of kinship by blood and marriage, adoption creates a new category in which an adult chooses a child, thus conferring on that child all the rights, privileges, and inheritance normally reserved for biological children. Though the adopted child has done nothing to deserve this outpouring of gracious benevolence—potentially lands, title, reputation, prestige, wealth, and even the right to be sibling with the parent’s/s’ biological children—the act is binding and irreversible, and the adopted child’s life is forever changed. And in the biblical narrative, it is clear that the decision to adopt a child is extremely important to that child’s identity and well-being.

In these times of increased numbers of orphaned and needy children but a decreasing number of domestic and international adoptions in the United States, there remain three main ways that U.S. citizens welcome children into their homes through adoption: private adoption, adoption through the foster care system, and international adoption. Private adoption and international adoption have declined significantly over the past 10 years, and international adoption has seen significant increases in cost and administrative safeguards. Adoption through the foster care system is more complex today due to the ongoing challenges

to that system: transracial adoption and the adoption of children with trauma issues have added complexity but also respond to critical needs.

Pastors are often consulted by church members on a range of issues concerning adoption, including psychological, ethical, spiritual, and practical questions. Perhaps the three most helpful things a pastor can do to prepare to respond to such questions are:

1. Offer to listen to and pray with an individual or couple considering adoption. God calls certain individuals to open their lives to an adopted child, but “zeal without wisdom is foolishness” (Prov 19:2). There are few decisions that will more profoundly affect the life of the child and the church member than the decision to adopt. Providing a safe space where members considering adoption can begin to discern their own hopes and limitations is extremely important. Are they open to adopting transracial, special needs, or older children, or to those with trauma issues? Praying with them for discernment can be helpfully framed around discovering together what situation is best for the child—the critical factor in adoptions today. Seeing the adoption process through the perspective of the child immediately deepens empathy in the potential adoptive family.
2. Connect potentially adoptive parent(s) with resources. Deborah Siegel’s concise 2015 summary of current adoption trends and updated language provides a helpful overview: <http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/111715p18.shtml>. Organizations such as Send Relief (sendrelief.org), which operates a fund and counseling service for ministers and missionaries “to ignite a culture of adoption,” are a recent development to support Christian families through the adoptive process.
3. Connect families considering adoption with adoptive families. Their heart-to-heart conversations will provide space for families discerning adoption to share their hopes and fears and receive experience-rich feedback.

The writer of Ephesians uses adoption—that striking exception to the regular rules of human kinship—as the symbol of God’s gracious action to include us in God’s very own family. Because of God’s gracious choice, we become “joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17) and “heirs of the promise” (Heb 6:17), which grafts us onto the life-giving vine that is Jesus Christ. Like the abandoned child, we have done nothing to deserve this gracious deed, and surely, without it, we would have died.

God of life, Who graciously adopted us into Your family through Jesus Christ, grant open eyes and hearts that we might see the needs of children beyond our own family circles. Give _____ wisdom to discern your leading as they/she/he consider(s) adopting a child in need of earthly parents who will make Your great love known to him/her. And give us, your adopted children, the courage to redraw family lines so that we, relying on Your grace, which is sufficient for the needs of all, might consider each child as our own. In the strong name of Jesus Christ, amen.

DYING WITHOUT KNOWING GOD

Dr. Edith Humphrey, William F. Orr Professor of New Testament

Recently Pope Francis had a quiet conversation with a worried child about his nonbelieving (and deceased) father; he turned the boy's torture into a teachable moment for all those gathered around him (<http://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2018/04/16/is-my-dad-in-heaven-little-boy-asks-pope/>). Technically, he left the judgment up to God ("God is the one who says who goes to heaven"), but in effect he assured this boy that his father was in God's presence, even though in his life he "did not have the gift of faith." He emphasized the boy's insistence that his father was a "good man," the father's permission for his children to be baptized (despite his own lack of faith), and the conviction that all of us are "children of God."

I am sure many were touched by the Pope's connection with the boy Emmanuele and his desire to set the child's mind at rest. But biblically, both the pontiff's assurance and his grounds for it are unfounded. He encouraged the children gathered around him to go beyond what Hans Von Balthasar termed the hope that all will be saved and urged them to declare that the boy's father is indeed now in God's presence. His major theological point was that all are children of God. Both moves, however, are countered by John 1:12—"yet to those who received him, who believe in his name, God gave the power to become the children of God." We are born God's beloved creatures; we become His children (on the basis of Christ's actions) when we turn to Him.

So what should we think about those who die without knowing God? It's helpful to remember that human beings long for assurances: well-meaning Christians have vacillated between the tolerance expressed by the Pope and the plain-speaking of those who insist that only those who have said the sinner's prayer are "saved." I think that instead we must acknowledge mystery. Just as no one knows when Christ will return, so we must not judge the final fate of others—either positively or negatively (1 Cor 4:4). This reserve is particularly important in the case of those who have not made a public profession of faith. But it is not simply a reverent agnosticism to which we are called. After all, these people may not know God, but God knows them and considers them dear! And so,

we are called to pray for them—and to pray in the assurance that the ones whom we love, God loves infinitely more. God alone perceives the trajectory upon which they have traveled and continue to move; if there is even a spark, we can be sure that "He will not quench a smoldering wick" (Isa 42:3, quoted in Matt 12:20).

Some people will respond, "What use is there to pray for those who have already died—surely the die is cast, and there is nothing more for us to do?" But where is that written in the Scriptures? Yes, Hebrews 9:27 tells us that "it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment"—but this passage does not assert that nothing can happen between death and the final judgment of a person. It seems that many of us have taken this phrase beyond its meaning, perhaps in reaction to the silliness (and blasphemy) of medieval "indulgences": have we thrown out the baby with the bathwater? We know that we cannot pay for our relatives to be saved; we know that God is the judge, and that one who rejects Christ finally (and sadly) may be allowed that freedom. But why should we think that our prayers for these beloved ones must cease at their moment of death? On what grounds do we assume that there is no further growth toward God or in glory after death? No, our love demands that we do not turn off our concern like a switch, as though death had the final say. Instead, we continue to hope and pray for their movement toward a God who has conquered the power of death and who "wills that all should be saved" (1 Tim 2:4).

What is happening to our loved ones after death is a mystery, but God's love for them is assured. Neither can our love for them be broken by death. Our friend or family member might not have "known" God in a self-conscious way during life—but are there not many ways of knowing? More than that, he or she was known by God, the One "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). Who is so great a God as our God? He is the God who does wonders—including calling us into His presence, confirming even the smallest seed of faith, and (as C. S. Lewis puts it), giving us faces so that we can see and love Him.

We are neither to give blithe assurances nor grieve as those who have no hope; rather, let us cast our care upon—and direct our hope toward—the God of creation and of resurrection, who has made provision for all by taking on everything that it is to be human and by vanquishing sin and death.

O Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ you have given to us sure hope and the assurance that you hold every one of your creatures in your care. We pray that you would shed forth upon your whole Church, both in paradise and on earth, the bright beams of your light and heavenly comfort. Help us, we pray, to cast our cares upon you, in the hope that we, with those whom we love, may enter, in the last day, into your eternal glory. Give us faithfulness in prayer and the power to live as those who believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting. By your Holy Spirit, strengthen in us this faith and hope all the days of our life, through the love of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you, Father, and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

FAMILY PROBLEMS

The Rev. Dr. Christine Chakoian, Vice President for Seminary Advancement

In the opening verses of the novel *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy writes, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Whether he is accurate about happy families is unclear to me—but he is right that we should be careful not to generalize about families that are struggling.

Family problems emerge in many unique forms: financial stress, addiction, physical or mental illness, grief, job loss, divorce, relocation, adultery, and many, many more. And the truth is that even the healthiest transitions—ushered by the birth of a child, empty-nesting, aging parents, even retirement—can be stress-inducing.

Family life is complicated. We can find comfort in recognizing that this fact has been true from the beginning of time. From the beginning, Scripture is filled with examples of tension between spouses—Adam and Eve find themselves ashamed before the Lord (Gen 3:7ff); Abraham and Sarah lose hope for having a child (Gen 16:1ff). Sibling rivalries and betrayals frequently appear—Cain murders his brother Abel (Gen 4:1ff); Joseph’s jealous brothers sell him into slavery to the Egyptians (Gen 37:12ff). Children clash with their parents and in-laws—Jacob colludes with his mother to fool his father in order to gain the birthright (Gen 27:1ff); later, Jacob is fooled by his father-in-law into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Gen 30:21ff). It does not magically improve in the new “household of God” instituted by Jesus; we see the same tensions, rivalries, and clashes among the “brothers and sisters” of Christ in his Church.

What can we do? First, it helps to acknowledge that family life has never been easy . . . though it is easy to despair or place blame. The truth is that all households struggle. We are tempted to see only joy and success in other people’s homes, but the proverb is true: “Never compare our insides to other people’s outsides.” We have no idea what struggles people endure behind closed doors.

Second, it helps to identify the particular struggles that people are experiencing rather than generalizing. As those who come alongside individuals and families in their

struggles, it is above our “pay grade” to offer diagnoses, but it can be reassuring to help people name their pain. It might be the feeling of having failed their children by divorcing, losing a mortgage, or not parenting well. It might be dread from no longer knowing what or whom to trust after being cheated on by a spouse or a parent’s relapsing into alcohol abuse. It might be the sense of isolation that comes when members of a family are fighting with each other. It might be a perfect storm of a spouse’s job loss, a child’s diagnosis, and an aging parent’s illness. Even when multiple stressors combine, naming the particular feelings and issues helps make a person or family feel slightly less global and cataclysmic about the struggles faced.

Third, it is crucial that people recognize they are not alone. Encouraging people to find help—in talking with you, discovering a 12-Step program or support group, or even volunteering with others—brings comfort in distress. In times of deep conflict within a family, a counselor can be especially helpful to move toward peace and possibly reconciliation as well.

Above all, our faith reminds us that God is with us through it all: “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age,” Jesus tells us (Matt 28:20). Paul confirms this statement when he writes, “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” (Rom 8:37-39).

What attitude of prayer is helpful? As the Psalms remind us, there are many attitudes of prayer that are appropriate, depending on the need: lament for one’s pain or grief; confession of one’s own failure or complicity; pleas for healing of body or mind, and the mending of broken relationships. Over time, the particular prayer needs will likely change. But we know that placing all our fears and worries, yearning and confession, at the throne of grace never ends. And who knows? Perhaps one day, a prayer of thanksgiving will be in order, too—thanksgiving for fences mended, feelings softened, and relationships restored.

The following prayer uses helpful language for praying with people facing family problems.

Gracious God, you know all too well what it is like for your family to face problems. You have seen your sons and daughters struggle with deep pain, fight with one another, fail to fulfill their promises, and even walk away from you. There is no struggle that you do not know intimately, and we are grateful for your care for us.

We are bold to ask, then, Lord, for your presence with us. Forgive our own failures, and help us to forgive those who have failed us. Mend our brokenness, and heal those we love. Help us to receive the love that others offer and not to be ashamed of our need. And, above all, dearest Lord, help us to know deep in our hearts that we are not alone. All these things we pray in the name of our brother and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTERNET ABUSE

The Rev. Derek Davenport, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute and Digital Marketing Analyst

It's hard to keep track of the groundbreaking papers, blogs, studies, and articles that cover the dangers of screen time and abuses of the Internet among teens and children. But Internet abuses are not limited to kids. There is no shortage of tragic abuse committed by adults. How does it happen? Often, it just creeps in nearly unnoticed.

For example, it can be so frustrating when something stubbornly stays on the "tip of your tongue." Whatever the subject, there's something deeply unsettling when you can't quite recall that "one, unimportant thing." The name of that catchy song. The other movie that actress is in. The city with that really cool thing you saw a while back. The team we played in the play-offs five years ago. Now, though, you only need a few seconds to find that one, unimportant thing. A quick search on your phone, laptop, tablet, game system, or even TV will provide you with the answer. Access to information is virtually ubiquitous. But it comes at a price.

Strangely enough, the ability to access that one, unimportant thing, which we're frequently trying to use in building a communicative relationship with someone else, often comes at the *price* of our relationships—with other people, certainly, and also with God. Or at least it can come at that price. Accessing that one, unimportant thing can cost us our relationships because, in addition to searching the Internet for nearly all-things-informational, we can do or encounter many relationship-damaging, even relationship-destroying things. Bullying, identity theft, addiction to pornography, digital piracy, misuse of social media, and myriad other abuses are now possible from a device we keep in our pockets. And naturally, our devices also make it much easier simply to ignore the people who are physically in our presence.

When we minister to those who are affected by some form of Internet abuse—including over-use and addiction—it is wise to remember that Internet abuses can range in severity from occasional rudeness to unwise, habitual, unethical, and even illegal activity. Prayer is appropriate in each case. Referral to additional professional help may also be necessary in serious situations.

Of course, the devices and the access they provide are really just tools. We may find it convenient to blame "the Internet" for the adverse results of its abuse, but ultimately such scapegoating isn't helpful. If a marriage breaks up because of a spouse's addiction to pornography on "the Net," or depression intensifies through relational reliance on social media, or a loved one suffers cyber-bullying, blaming the medium may offer a quick hit of self-righteousness, but doing so won't—and can't—offer lasting healing.

Instead of focusing on the tool, therefore, it may be more helpful to identify its impact on our relationships. Praying for the relationships adversely affected by our abuse of technology not only restores our communion with God and invites God into those human relationships but also forces us to consider the people around us. As we pray for and with people suffering from Internet abuse—whether as abusers or victims of its abuse—we must be both respectful and honest. One's actions online affect the lives of real human beings—the individual user's included. By naming that fact out loud in prayer, we can ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen and heal relationships as well as begin addressing the abuse itself.

The following prayer provides language for praying about this important challenge in our technology-saturated world.

Holy Spirit, we ask you to mend our broken relationships. Open our eyes to the people you have placed in our lives and heal the hurts caused by our actions. Restore us to right relationship with you and with one another. Show us how to use the tools available to us to draw close to one another and to you. Teach us to use our abilities for your purposes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

PERSONAL TRAGEDY

Dr. Ron Tappy, G. Albert Shoemaker Professor of Bible and Archaeology

Throughout the Bible, we read personal pleas by both those who find themselves in great danger, anguish, or bereavement and those who intercede on behalf of others in such circumstances. These prayers cover a host of distressing situations relating to personal or communal heartbreak and tragedy:

- » Elisha prayed for the Shunammite woman's dead son (2 Kgs 4:33);
- » Jairus pled for his daughter (Luke 8:41);
- » Jesus addressed the Father outside Lazarus' tomb (John 11:41-42);
- » Peter prayed for Tabitha (Acts 9:40);
- » Hezekiah petitioned God for health (2 Kgs 20:2);
- » Daniel prayed under intense religious persecution (Dan 6:10, 9:3-4);
- » Jonah prayed from the belly of the great fish (Jon 2:1) and later when consumed with anger and confusion in Nineveh (4:2);
- » Stephen prayed while being stoned to death (Acts 7:59);
- » Paul prayed when shipwrecked near Malta (Acts 27:29) and later when bitten by a poisonous viper (Acts 28:3); and, of course,
- » Jesus prayed in Gethsemane on the night of his arrest (Matt 26; Mark 14; Luke 22).

In his teaching Jesus tells us how to pray: "When you pray, say, 'Our Father who art in Heaven . . .'" (Matt 6:9; cf. Luke 11:2). "Our" reminds us that we need not be alone; we are part of a community of believers who can assist us through times of great distress or personal tragedy. In such times, God comforts both the bereaved and the companion seeking to help the griever. Psalm 54:4 may be translated, "God is my helper; the Lord is with those who support/sustain my life."

Jesus' guidance to his disciples also captures both the personal, intimate, present, caring nature of a creator God who walks with us and deals with us as a kinsperson might ("Our Father"; cf. Genesis 2-3) and the power of a transcendent, cosmic God ("who art in heaven") who brings order from chaos by speaking through majestic, divine fiat (Genesis 1). In times of personal tragedy and direst need,

we crave the former, intimate God. But in the very depths of despair, before any healing has begun, the inclination to fear that God is too transcendent to notice us may become all too real.

Sometimes when we pray in our most broken moments, we may perceive no answer, receive no comfort. God seems distant, and we simply cannot understand or explain what has happened. We almost become afraid to pray, or see no point to praying. Our loss is already too real. In these times of feeling helpless, we can encourage others and ourselves to remember that it was the transcendent God of Genesis 1 who hovered over chaos and brought order out of it. God has that desire. God's transcendence can be for us an emblem of his power, not his distance from us.

In times of personal tragedy, praying implies belief that God can and will give succor. Even if our heartache is so great that we cannot immediately make sense of the situation or experience God's response, the act of prayer can serve to focus us on God, thereby stabilizing us. In biblical Hebrew, the verb "to pray" belongs to a class of words that often denotes reflexive action: the benefits of the action return to the doer. By requiring us to center ourselves in God's mercies, prayer helps us "learn" both about ourselves and about God—activities we moderns tend to separate. The Bible does not.

This is not to say, however, that in the immediate, heartbreaking moments of personal tragedy praying is easy, that we feel like doing it, or that we even know what to say should we want to pray. In the deepest depths, personal anguish may become so great that we cannot even speak. But even in our utter weakness and inability to offer so much as a helpless groan, we are not alone; there, the Great Comforter will intercede for us "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:23).

People caught in the throes of personal tragedy simply need comfort and compassion, not a theology lesson. During the initial shock, the anguished one may be experiencing multiple and possibly conflicting, uncontrollable emotions: painful

nostalgia, anger, denial, disbelief, remorse or regret, guilt, even a loss of faith in God. In those awful early moments and days, it is anything but comforting to hear platitudes like “this was God’s will, part of God’s plan,” “you must accept it and move on,” or “all things work together for good.” Better to admit there are no clear answers to explain the tragedy. Better simply to reassure the anguished person of God presence. In the case of a loved one who has died, it is a comforting ministry to the survivor(s) to remember the deceased person(s) verbally with honor and love. Often merely our silent presence with and holding the hand of the bereaved communicate the clearest, most needed message.

In ministering to those experiencing personal tragedy, there is perhaps no better collection of writings to guide us than the Psalter. It contains more laments of those in dire distress than any other literary genre. The Psalms address situations of sickness and disease, death, persecution, loneliness and affliction, sinfulness, forsakenness, shame, grief and sorrow, failure of friendship, moral and spiritual weakness, and more. Biblical laments typically include a clear expression of hope (e.g., [Ps 22:9-11](#)), as the psalmists face these tragic circumstances with both heart-rending pleas and beautiful promises of God’s presence and love. Even when the severity of illness shakes one’s faith, when a person is faced with being “a mere breath,” “a sojourner,” “a passing guest” in this earthly life, that person can still ask the Lord to listen and not to remain silent before his or her tears ([Pss 39; 41; 42](#)).

Not long ago, when someone very dear to me lay in the balance between life and death, the Psalms spoke to us as nothing or no one else could. [Psalms 91](#) and [121](#) were particularly helpful. God will cover you with his pinions; he will not slumber; he will watch over your life. As I read from the Psalter to comfort my loved one, I suddenly realized how much I myself needed to hear those words. In my feeble attempt to bring comfort to someone else, I found it myself. In those moments, the prayerful psalms were not reduced to academic discussion in the classroom; they became living voices speaking to our very real and near-tragic circumstance. So when we are overcome, distraught, oppressed, anguished, or feel as though we simply want to fly away to a restful place ([Psalm 55](#)), we can take refuge in the shadow of God’s wings as he fulfills his purpose for us ([Pss 57:1-2; 91:4](#)).

[Psalm 77](#) can also be instructive in anguished circumstances. Ironically, the writer does not specify the nature of his personal tragedy or indicate that deliverance ever came. But whatever the matter, the poet was clearly suffering through a personal tragedy. One could not offer a bleaker, more desperate description of the situation than that found in verses 1-10. The sufferer came to feel that God had forgotten him, perhaps abandoned or even spurned him. The one thread that helped him through the horrifying night of personal anguish was a memory of God’s past great deeds (vv 5-6, 11-12)—even those performed in behalf of others. The supplicant concluded his prayer by quoting an ancient

hymn of praise extoling God’s power to help and care for his people (vv 16-20).

Sometimes we can only climb up into our watch tower, wait, and be long-suffering in our prayers ([Habakkuk 1-2](#)). As we struggle through the various stages that attend personal tragedy, wait for healing that seems too slow in coming, or experience what feels like unending minutes in which we lack the strength to recognize God’s presence and great love for us, we can with God’s help follow the psalmists’ inclination to recall God’s past goodness. As the Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we cannot manage even an utterance, the Psalms have the power to speak *for* us as well as *to* us.

A succinct but meaningful prayer in times of deep anguish comes from Psalm 57:1-2:

*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me;
for in thee my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.*

*. . . May God send forth his steadfast love
and his faithfulness.*

Helpful resources on the topic of prayer and personal tragedy include:

- » Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*. Revised and expanded edition. Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000.
- » Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.
- » C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. New York: Harper, 2009.
- » Wayne A. Spear, *The Theology of Prayer: A Systematic Study of the Biblical Teaching on Prayer*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979.

PREGNANCY ISSUES

The Rev. Erin Davenport, MSW-LSW, Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute

New life enters the world each minute through a pregnant woman's giving birth. The advent is incredible and miraculous. The Lord, the giver of life, allows women this incredible opportunity of experiencing the forming of another person within their body. But that experience is not universal for women, nor is it easy or without great pain. Many, even most mothers will remind us that the pain of childbirth is a mere memory compared to the great joy brought by seeing their newborn children—but the next few paragraphs acknowledge and honor the pain of pregnancy.

Our biology reminds us of the possibility of pregnancy. Each month, from the time of puberty, women are reminded of whether they are pregnant or fertile. Birth control does not completely quiet this wondering until menopause ends the possibility of pregnancy. For women "trying" to get pregnant, this cessation is a painful reminder. For those who are not "trying," it often brings a sigh of relief. But all women of childbearing "age and stage" are dealing with this possibility, or lack of possibility, in some form or another.

The moment a woman realizes she is pregnant, her life changes. For the rest of her life, this change will be documented in her physical records. Whether or not the pregnancy is planned, wanted, or results in the live birth of a child, the pregnancy is now a part of her physical story. How each woman deals with and processes pregnancy emotionally and spiritually is different. Those differences need to be respected and honored.

Outside their OB/GYN office, few women discuss their pregnancies that do not result in the birth of a live child, but many women have those stories. They are shared carefully when these women discover that others have similar stories of loss. And as they escape women's mouths, the pain is real and alive and difficult, no matter how many years have passed.

In such cases, the role of pastor or lay leader is to give women and their partners the space to talk about these moments in their lives—moments that have caused them

some of their greatest pain. If you are let into these family secrets, cherish this confiding in you, and let the family lead you in how to care for them. As in all pastoral care situations, your role is not to fix the problem but to walk with the person(s) struggling and point them to Jesus. The most valuable things you can offer a woman or couple in the midst of loss surrounding pregnancy are the relationship and hope found in Jesus Christ.

Oftentimes, meaning no harm, pastors, family members, and friends ask questions of women and couples who are in the midst of many pregnancy and fertility issues—questions that are extremely painful. These questions are typically asked rather flippantly and without room for a couple or individual actually to answer them. If you ask such questions in the midst of a long conversation, or within the appropriate context of a conversation in which you sincerely want to hear the answer and have the opportunity to do so, ask them—with sensitivity. But be aware that most blunders occur because the question is asked in a conversation and context that allows inadequate or even no space for an honest response.

Here are a few tips for avoiding unfortunate verbal mistakes commonly and frequently made in churches and in life:

1. Do not ask a couple why they do not have children *or* when they are going to have children. Instead, tell them that you believe they would make great parents and that, no matter whether they have children or not, you love and support them.
2. Do not ask a couple who has one child why they have not had more children *or* when they are going to have more children. Instead, tell them they are great parents and that you are very blessed to know their child.
3. Do not ask a woman why she has not had children. Do not ask her if she wants to have children. This goes for all women of all ages! Instead, affirm her and let her know she is cared for and valued.

There is great joy and great pain in the reality of pregnancy. Here is a sample prayer that helps honor both the pain of pregnancy and the pain of infertility. I encourage you to share the stories of infertility from the Bible with those to whom you minister. Some of those stories have a happy ending, some do not. But the longing of those mothers for children is still true today:

- » Sarah, in [Genesis 16-18:18; 21:1-8](#);
- » The wife and female servants of Abimelech, in [Genesis 20](#);
- » Rebekah, in [Genesis 25:19-26](#);
- » Rachel, in [Genesis 30:1-24](#);
- » The wife of Manoah, in [Judges 13](#);
- » Hannah, in [1 Samuel 1-2:11](#);
- » Michal, in [2 Samuel 6:23](#);
- » The Shunammite woman, in [2 Kings 4:8-17](#); and
- » Elizabeth, in [Luke 1:5-25](#).

Lord Jesus, today we lift up to you _____ and _____ who are struggling with the reality of (infertility and/or loss). Lord, we thank you for the deep desire you have placed in their hearts for a child. And Lord, like the weeping of Hannah to Eli, we weep with them. We cry out to you and ask for your mercy. We pray that you would give them comfort, peace, and trust that Jesus loves us no matter what. We commit as a prayerful people to pray continuously for them as they go through this journey and to lift them up in every way we can. In Jesus' name, amen.

RELATIONSHIPS STRAINED AND BROKEN

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

In Genesis 2:18 we read that after creating the first human being, God decided it was “not good that the man should be alone”—so God created another person. This part of the creation story reminds us that, from the beginning, we were created to be in relationship with others. Human relationships are the source of some of life’s greatest joys. After all, it is in relationship that we learn to love and care for others, and to receive love and care in return. For this reason, relationships can also be the source of some of our deepest pain. Strained or broken relationships may create wounds that are very difficult to heal.

Often when people are experiencing these kinds of struggles in their relationships, they reach out for support from their faith community. Praying with someone in this circumstance can, in itself, be a way to accompany the person on a path toward healing. Even so, it is important to be sensitive to the many complex circumstances that may be involved. It may not always be possible to know all the details of what has happened in a relationship. In fact, it is likely that you will only know the story from the perspective of the person who has requested prayer.

In this situation, it is not really your responsibility to try to sort out the “facts” of what happened; rather, your main task is to listen carefully to what the person shares with you and help to name the pain, grief, and other emotions the person is experiencing. Helping someone acknowledge the feelings that result from strained or broken relationships is an important step, because this acknowledgment may give the person permission to be more honest with God in prayer. Allowing individuals to express their pain and grief is especially important if the possibility exists that the relationship in question cannot be mended. Here, the Psalms may be particularly helpful as a resource for prayer since they express such a wide range of human emotions. The following psalms might be particularly useful when praying with people who are struggling with strained or broken relationships: [Psalms 4, 27, 40, 42, 91, and 103](#).

When you pray with someone who is lamenting a damaged relationship, it is also important to ensure that you are not

giving relational advice or encouraging false hope. As noted above, you will likely only know one person’s perspective on the situation, so it is vital to remember that your role is to offer support and prayer—and not attempt to tell the person what he or she should do in the relationship. If you sense that someone really wants specific relationship advice, consider referring her or him to a professional counselor or therapist who specializes in this kind of work. Also, avoid saying things like “I’m sure everything will be fine” and “I know that God will make this situation right.” We cannot know the future, and we cannot make promises about how others will respond to a person or about how God may be working in a particular situation. Making these kinds of statements may relieve our own anxiety in the moment, but doing so risks planting false hope in someone who is already vulnerable.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do if you are called upon to pray with someone experiencing a strained or broken relationship is simply to be present—to listen carefully without giving advice or trying to “fix” the person’s situation. Reassure the individual you’re praying with that God has promised to be with us throughout all the trials we experience in life, and that God can hold all the anger, sadness, and fear that we may need to express through prayer. Remind yourself that it is not your job to heal another person; God is the one who leads us all toward healing and restoration. Simply by offering support and expressing care, you can serve as a powerful reminder of God’s healing presence, even in the midst of struggle and pain.

A prayer such as the one below may be helpful as you minister to someone in this circumstance:

Gracious God, we thank you today for the gift of being in relationship with one another. We give you thanks especially for all the people who love and care for _____. We ask that you would help _____ to feel your love today and to know that you have created him/her/them as your beloved child(ren). As _____ goes/go through this very challenging time, help him/her/them to sense your presence and to trust that you are guiding him/her/them toward healing. We ask that you would grant faith, hope, and peace to _____ for this day and for the days to come. Amen.

TEMPTATION

The Rev. Dr. David Morse, Lecturer in United Methodist Studies

Prayer and temptation are linked in what is, arguably, the most famous and maybe the greatest prayer in the New Testament: The Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4). This prayer contains a request that we not be led into temptation. The close link between temptation and prayer reflected in The Lord's Prayer is sustained by other passages in the New Testament. For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus roused his sleeping disciples with the words, "Keep watching and praying so that you may not enter into temptation" (Matt 26:41).

The connection between the experiences of prayer and temptation prompts at least two questions: First, What is temptation? and second, How does prayer minister to us in times of temptation?

What is temptation?

I suspect that if you were to ask people what comes to mind when they hear the word "temptation," most of them would report thinking of the term in a quasi-religious sense. Don't give in to it. Resist it. Or, as urged increasingly often by advertisers, indulge it! Temptation is the enticement to do something bad, to violate a rule, to disrespect a norm—to do something that is so clearly (though sadly, as some people see it, so deliciously) wrong that "the wrath of God" or some other authority is sure to fall down upon the transgressor. While in some settings that result may come to fruition, such a view of temptation is a very narrow one.

The word temptation in the New Testament—the word that appears in the Lord's Prayer—is the noun *peirasmos*, which basically means "test," whether a period of testing or a process of testing. It occurs 21 times in the New Testament in a total of 26 verses. The corresponding verb, *peirazō*, means to "take a test" or, in its passive voice, "to be tested." That word occurs 38 times in the New Testament in a total of 34 verses. While often having religious connotations, then, these words simply refer to taking a test or being tested.

When we think of tests, we normally think of some kind of educational setting, be it academic or vocational, in which

we are tested on how much we know or how competent we are with certain skills—what do you know, and what can you do? But these contexts are not the only ones for testing. Life itself is an arena of tests where we face a wide range of decisions about what to do and how to act. These existential tests reveal far more than what we know or what we can do. These "temptation-tests" reveal who we are. And it is in these settings that prayer becomes particularly significant.

How does prayer minister to us in times of temptation?

Prayer, in its most authentic form, is making a connection. When we pray in the midst of life and its "tests," we are making a threefold connection through the power of God's grace. As Paul reminds us in Romans 8:26, none of us really knows how to pray, but the Spirit makes possible our connection with the Creator when we use our words, thoughts, and yearnings to reach toward God. In the act of prayer, mediated by the Spirit, we are connected to God—the source of our strength for "passing the test," for not entering into temptation.

And since God is the foundation of all creation, through God we are also connected to others. In prayer, then—both individually regarding our own temptations and with other people facing tests of their own—we become aware of the responsibility we have to love others, to seek their good through mercy and justice. We are renewed, inspired, and empowered to be disciples of the risen Christ.

As we pray to experience God's grace and mercy through periods of testing—times of temptation—the close connection maintained with our Creator enables us to be God's disciples—to enter into right relations with God and with other people, to walk faithful paths that honor the Lord Jesus Christ, and to become the persons God has created us—in God's own image—to be.

In praying with someone who is experiencing temptation, who is undergoing a test, consider using language such as that in the prayer below:

Merciful God, in this time of testing, help Your child _____ to know the comfort of your presence, the strength of Your Spirit, and the assurance of Your Son's Lordship as together we seek to do Your will. We make these requests in the gracious name of Jesus. Amen.

SAMPLE PRAYERS

ADOPTION

God of life, Who graciously adopted us into Your family through Jesus Christ, grant open eyes and hearts that we might see the needs of children beyond our own family circles. Give _____ wisdom to discern your leading as they/she/he consider(s) adopting a child in need of earthly parents who will make Your great love known to him/her. And give us, your adopted children, the courage to redraw family lines so that we, relying on Your grace, which is sufficient for the needs of all, might consider each child as our own. In the strong name of Jesus Christ, amen.

DYING WITHOUT KNOWING GOD

O Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ you have given to us sure hope and the assurance that you hold every one of your creatures in your care. We pray that you would shed forth upon your whole Church, both in paradise and on earth, the bright beams of your light and heavenly comfort. Help us, we pray, to cast our cares upon you, in the hope that we, with those whom we love, may enter, in the last day, into your eternal glory. Give us faithfulness in prayer and the power to live as those who believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting. By your Holy Spirit, strengthen in us this faith and hope all the days of our life, through the love of your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you, Father, and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

FAMILY PROBLEMS

Gracious God, you know all too well what it is like for your family to face problems. You have seen your sons and daughters struggle with deep pain, fight with one another, fail to fulfill their promises, and even walk away from you. There is no struggle that you do not know intimately, and we are grateful for your care for us.

We are bold to ask, then, Lord, for your presence with us. Forgive our own failures, and help us to forgive those who have failed us. Mend our brokenness, and heal those we love. Help us to receive the love that others offer and not to be ashamed of our need. And, above all, dearest Lord, help us to know deep in our hearts that we are not alone. All these things we pray in the name of our brother and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTERNET ABUSE

Holy Spirit, we ask you to mend our broken relationships. Open our eyes to the people you have placed in our lives and heal the hurts caused by our actions. Restore us to right relationship with you and with one another. Show us how to use the tools available to us to draw close to one another and to you. Teach us to use our abilities for your purposes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

PERSONAL TRAGEDY

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me;
for in thee my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.

. . . May God send forth his steadfast love
and his faithfulness.

(Psalm 57:1-2)

PREGNANCY ISSUES

Lord Jesus, today we lift up to you _____ and _____ who are struggling with the reality of infertility (and/or loss). Lord, we thank you for the deep desire you have placed in their hearts for a child. And Lord, like the weeping of Hannah to Eli, we weep with them. We cry out to you and ask for your mercy. We pray that you would give

them comfort, peace, and trust that Jesus loves us no matter what. We commit as a prayerful people to pray continuously for them as they go through this journey and to lift them up in every way we can. In Jesus' name, amen.

RELATIONSHIPS STRAINED AND BROKEN

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TEMPTATION

Merciful God, in this time of testing, help Your child _____ to know the comfort of your presence, the strength of Your Spirit, and the assurance of Your Son's Lordship as together we seek to do Your will. We make these requests in the gracious name of Jesus. Amen.

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