

Speaking of God

Honest Christianity for a World Seeking Hope

How God Speaks to Us in Prayer

Our Whole Life as Dialogue with God

Prayer is not first about finding the right words or formulas. It is about standing before Holy Mystery who is already present to us. Repeating an earlier point, God is not a distant being we must persuade or reach, but the One who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

To pray, then, is to open our lives to this Presence—to stand in awe before the incomprehensible God, to bring our joys and

burdens honestly, and to allow even our silence and longing to become prayer.

This means that prayer does not happen only in church or during set times. What we teach about prayer is an invitation to see our whole life as dialogue with God. When we accept daily tasks with faith, when we love another generously, when we suffer yet remain open to hope—all of this is prayer.

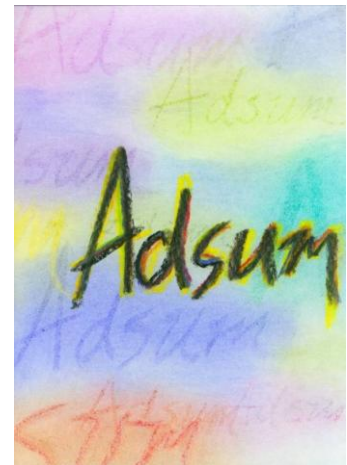
God is Always Present

In the midst of ordinary living, God is always present, drawing us deeper into love and trust. This vision frees us from thinking of prayer as something rare or distant and helps us recognize that prayer is woven into the very fabric of our existence.

Abraham Heschel, a great Jewish mystic, has called prayer an "ontological necessity," which is to say, an inborn hunger for God. "Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use," he wrote, "a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather an ontological necessity, an act that

expresses the very essence of [being human]. We pray because it is the essence of [the human person] to pray."¹

If that is true, if there is such an inborn hunger, then can prayer really be far away



from us? Often when we pray, we are victims of an historical idea that we must summon God as though God were not already with us. "Come, Holy Spirit!" we pray. But isn't the Holy Spirit already with us?

Let us open this important theological chapter with a prayer poem composed to reflect how the Jewish Mystic Abraham Heschel might have prayed:

Poem in the Spirit of Abraham Heschel

I do not pray to move you, O Holy Mystery,
for you are already nearer than my breath.
I pray because my soul must speak,
because silence alone cannot bear your nearness.

I pray not to change the world's vast order,
but to be changed within it,
to awaken to wonder
in the small, trembling hours of my life.

I pray because I am human,
because the mystery presses in on me,
because without your light
my words would wither,
and my heart forget its song.

I pray because prayer is my being,
the pulse of who I am before you,
the eternal cry of dust and spirit:
Holy! Holy is the Mystery.

A Meditation

Turning Toward the Holy

We hang on to the idea that the Reign of God is somehow distant and actually not within us. This confusion is the result of all those centuries in which the church was focused on the dark side of the world. The world was the "opposite" of the church in this thinking. The world was somehow sinful while heaven was holy. We built buildings that would point us toward God. Their spires

reached upward toward where we thought heaven might be, away from us, away from earth, away from the mundane, away from everyday life. In so doing, were they also reaching away from the incarnation?

We folded our hands the same way, neatly pointed toward heaven, "up there." All these centuries later we still look for God in buildings. We still point our hands and hearts

upward and outward. But in fact, prayer is not a leaving of ourselves to go to God. It is not a movement away from earth. It is instead a

Turning Toward Holy Mystery

Let's take a deeper look at prayer and how it changes our lives. In *Christian at the Crossroads*, Karl Rahner speaks about prayer in ways that line up with his larger theology of Holy Mystery and self-communication.² He defines prayer as an encounter with Holy Mystery, stressing that prayer is not about rattling off words to a distant deity. It is the human spirit turning toward Holy Mystery who is already present. Prayer is a stance of openness before God's incomprehensibility—an act of awe and surrender, not control.



He emphasizes that prayer happens not only in “religious” moments but in the daily decisions and struggles of life as we saw above with Mary Ann. To live truthfully, lovingly,

radical movement to the center of life, to the center of creation. Prayer is finding God in the present, in the world, in our lives.

and faithfully is already a form of prayer, because it's a way of saying “yes” to God's self-gift. Such living, as Rahner has said, makes each of us into a sort of mystic, one who peers into the mystery.

“The Christian does not only pray in set words or holy places, he wrote. “[We] pray when we accept the demands of daily life in faith, when we love and when we suffer, for then [our] whole life becomes a dialogue with the God who is always present.”³

Hence, prayer does not have to be pious speech. It can be silence, longing, questioning, even complaint. For me, prayer often includes a bit of humor and plain, honest laughter about events or people. What matters is the honesty of bringing our real selves before God. In *Christian at the Crossroads*, he urges Christians not to give up on prayer even when it feels dry or wordless—because the Holy One is always present in the act of turning toward God.

At the crossroads of modern life, Rahner says, Christians face secularization and doubt. In this context, prayer becomes even more crucial: it grounds us in the experience of God's nearness, as Abraham Heschel said above, enabling us to live in faith and hope even when God seems hidden.

“Prayer is not chatter with a distant God,” he wrote, “but the opening of one's whole existence to the incomprehensible Mystery who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.”⁴

We expand these thoughts by pausing briefly to pray in the way that Karl Rahner may have spoken with and to God:

Prayer in the Spirit of Rahner

Holy Mystery,
You are nearer to me than my own breath,
yet greater than all my words can reach.

Teach me to pray not only with lips,
but with the living of my days—
in work and rest,
in love and suffering,
in every hidden “yes” to Your will.

When silence is all I have,
let my silence be prayer.

When questions weigh upon me,
let my questions be prayer.

When I stumble in weakness,
let my surrender be prayer.

For my whole life, Lord,
is a dialogue with You. Amen.

Prayer is Natural

Prayer leads us to our very center. Jesus, we must remember, was tempted in the desert to abandon his mission which was to be human. "Turn these stones into bread" he was tempted, something no human could do. But he resisted because he knew that being fully and authentically human is to be near to God. The message of the incarnation is that we are not called to be God. God instead is one of us now.

Elijah

So, the question remains for all of us: how can we hear and respond

In prayer, we gather together all the fragments of our lives, and we find in them the hand of God, molding us as a potter. In prayer, we take what is divided, ruptured, and scattered in our lives and give it to God who folds it all together to form beautiful vessels. In prayer, we hear the voice of God when we hear our own "word," which is expressed in love, and is created and ordered toward God.

to the echo within us? Elijah had the same question. He was at the end of his rope and deep in prayer and discernment when he

realized that what he needed was simply to listen. God had promised that the Holy One would soon be passing by, figuratively speaking.

As he listened, however, Elijah was in for a surprise. Here's the text from 1 Kings, 19:11-12: "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces but the Holy was not in the wind, and after the wind, an earthquake, but the Holy

was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Holy was not in the fire, and after the fire, a sound of sheer silence the tiniest whisper of a voice" (RMV).

When Elijah encountered this near silence, he wrapped his face in his cape and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave" (13a). And it was then that he heard the divine "voice."

A Meditation

Dialogue with God

The "dialogue" with God, as Karl Rahner has described it, consists in God speaking all right, but not with many words. In prayer, God speaks a single word, *and that word is the very life of the one who prays*. It is our life that God speaks, a life oriented toward mystery and open to the expanding horizon of God's energy and love. We are God's word to the world and people around us.

God's voice is a whisper which we, like Elijah, must bend our ears to hear. It is the fragile voice of a young man, scarcely able to understand his own fate, following his destiny to the cross. That young man's moment of truth with his Abba reveals an alluring yet frightening closeness.

It is, as Rudolf Otto has said, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a mystery before which we both tremble and are fascinated, before which we are both repelled and attracted.⁵

As we will see below in the chapter on the cross, prayer can lead us to accept difficult decisions, even if it means giving up our very lives. When we give ourselves to prayer, our life may never be the same!

Prayer is listening to this divine word spoken in our hearts, listening carefully, discerning God's voice in the din of voices that surround us. God is always creating us, always pouring Spirit and Word into us. The place where God meets us is the privileged place of the self, a place created by God for just such a meeting. Here we open that self in freedom and hear the grand utterance of our own name! Here we are shaped and formed, here we are made whole and holy, here we are able to know Abba.

If we fail to listen in this way, then we will fail to hear God speak. If we begin to believe somehow that we are our own source, that we establish our own destiny, that we are in control of life and death, then we will not hear. Then the Self is not open but closed, clinging as tightly as a clenched fist to shallow truths.⁶ Likewise, if we hold back any part of our self in our posture toward God, we will not hear God speaking. If we withhold a memory, a hurt, a pain, a failure, a desire, a gift, or any part of the Self, we may be blocking God's voice.

Prayer as Dialogue

Prayer is often called a "dialogue" between God and us but, in prayer, while we usually speak words toward God, whether oral or silent, God does not ordinarily speak words back to us. We don't normally hear voices in the tabernacle, see visions in the night, or have doves descending on us from above. This lack of a clear response may give us doubts about prayer.

Nonetheless, we often pray for things: a personal favor, a spiritual gift, a direction in life, forgiveness and reconciliation, praise and

honor of God, vocational clarity, or moral direction.

But do we simply end our prayer with our words, or does God respond to us somehow? In what way does God ordinarily speak to a person in prayer?⁷ God, we would say, "speaks" not many words to us, but rather a single word. The word divinely spoken is nothing less than the life of the one who prays. For we are aware that God is with us, continually creating us, constantly loving us and revealing us to ourselves at all times.

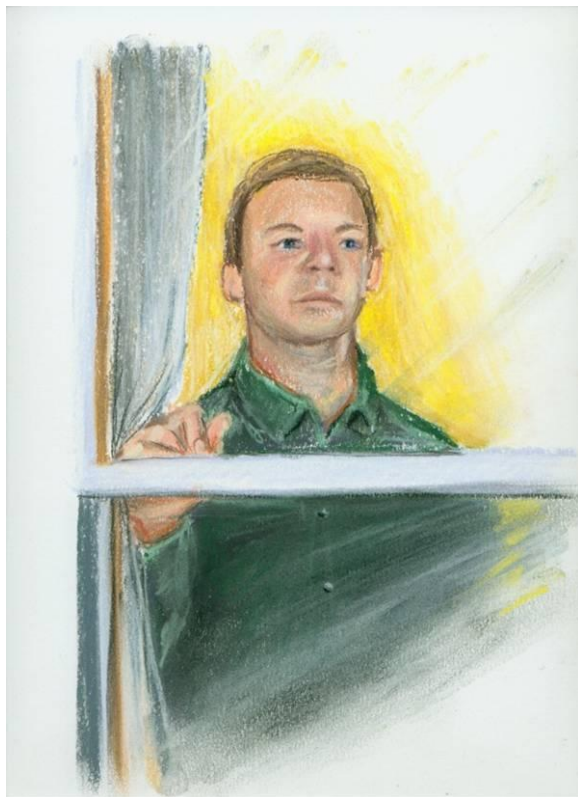
We are the Ones Are Spoken

Let's return to that big thought. We are the ones who are spoken in prayer, and to enter into our lives as divine in their source and divine in their destiny is to enter into prayer. We are bound up with God in such a dramatic

way that the intricacies of our lives are filled with divine energy. So, hearing God is hearing our lives as they are drawn into God in the everydayness where we live. We aren't waiting for voices from heaven, or signs in the night. No, the voice of God is speaking right now in our lives when we listen with our inner ear to the one who is the Light of the World.

We hear God speaking as we pay attention to those around us, in our homes and in the wider society. We hear God in our intuition, imagination, and thoughts when they are urging us to love. We find the word of God present and spoken, in the inner voice of our conscience, in our inner sense of right and wrong. Likewise, we hear God's voice in the actions and words of liturgy.

This sort of prayer of listening helps us understand what the Book of Kings meant when it described what Elijah heard as the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19) but such a sound of sheer silence means neither that God is absent or silent. Instead, it urges us to pay attention to how God nudges us and speaks to us in prayer.



This was not God speaking to Elijah in a quiet, intimate voice, but rather, after the huge display of earthquakes and fireworks, suddenly, the silence seemed large. In the face of this silence, Elijah came out of his hiding

place, and it was only then that God spoke to him. God told him to go back to work, to return to his mission, and to rely more than ever on the promise that God is with him.

We Don't Always Hear Well

But we aren't accustomed to listening, so we often don't hear when God speaks like this. Sometimes we are blocked in our hearing by psychological, ideological, sociological, or other factors of life. Sometimes we try to see ourselves apart from God's revelation, inspiration, or instigation, but when we do that, we are mired in a narrow sense of self and we are not listening in prayer.

We say that God's mercy is unbelievable because it is easier to believe in God's power than his tenderness. God's forgiveness is difficult to comprehend and believe. We tend

to have a view of God that resembles how we might behave: with harsh judgements, holding grudges against those who have harmed us, or nursing greed, lust, or envy. God is not like us, thank goodness.

In prayer, this all comes to light. As you open yourself to God you experience kindness, a divine sense of humor, divine gratitude for you, and motherly love and fatherly concern for you. You must offer your full self to God in prayer in order to receive your full self in return.

Theological Reflection

- What changes in your understanding of prayer when you imagine it not as speaking to a distant God, but as entering into communion and conversation with the Holy One who is already dwelling within you?
- How does praying with God invite you to listen more deeply, rather than simply offering words or requests?
- In what ways does this perspective challenge the idea of prayer as trying to “reach” God, and instead reveal prayer as joining the Spirit already at work in your heart?
- How might praying with God shape the way you approach daily life—relationships, decisions, joys, and struggles—as moments of shared presence rather than solitary effort?
- How do you *hear* the Holy One in prayer?

Pastoral Implications

In our Personal Lives

For the individual, prayer as dialogue means shifting from “saying prayers” to engaging in relationship. It is not only speaking but also listening—quieting the heart to hear what God may be

calling us toward. This perspective invites discernment: allowing prayer to shape daily choices, conversations, and actions.

The pastoral implication is that prayer moves beyond ritual words to become a living encounter with God's Mystery, leading a person to forgiveness, compassion, and courage in ordinary life.

In the Domestic Church

In the home, prayer as dialogue helps families discover God's Presence in their daily rhythms. Rather than being confined to formal prayers, prayer can take the form of listening together—at the dinner table, in moments of decision, or in times of difficulty. Families learn to ask, "*What might God be saying to us here?*" and to respond with love, patience, and generosity.

The pastoral implication is that the household itself becomes a place of listening and responding to Holy Mystery, where prayer is woven into meals, play, conflict, and reconciliation.

In the Parish or Congregation

For the parish, seeing prayer as dialogue with God re-orientes communal life around listening together. Liturgy becomes not only the prayers of the assembly but also a communal act of discernment—hearing what the Spirit is saying to the church today. Beyond worship, prayerful listening must extend into how the parish engages its neighborhood and wider culture: attending to the cries of the poor, the needs of the vulnerable, and the challenges of the times.

The pastoral implication is that prayer pushes the parish outward: what God reveals in prayer must be lived in service, justice, reconciliation, and peace.

We close with a prayer poem to help us take with us a dialogue with the Holy One:

Prayer as Dialogue

Not only words we speak to you,
but silence deep where hearts are true.
You whisper love, we pause, we hear,
your Presence calling, always near.

In church, at home, in work, in play,
your Spirit guides us day by day.
A voice that stirs, a gentle flame,
to act in mercy in your name.

So teach us, Lord, to stop, attend,
to listen well, our hearts to bend;
and in response, with love to live,
to serve, forgive, and freely give.

Endnotes

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 6.

² Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads: A Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. James Damske (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), esp. 54–70.

³ Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, 64.

⁴ Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, p. 58.

⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12–13.

⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1972).

⁷ Brian McDermott SJ, *What Are They Saying about the Grace of Christ?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).