

**Søren Kierkegaard**  
**(1813-1855)**

Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen in the early nineteenth century. He graduated from the University of Copenhagen and then spent two years in Germany before returning to Copenhagen, where he would spend the rest of his life. In 1843 he wrote and published his first book, *Either/Or*, which startled the religious world with its denouncement of watered-down Christianity.

In fact, Kierkegaard's life and works were a serious challenge to the institutional church that he believed had removed the necessary leap of faith and the individual's (as opposed to the masses') responsibility of commitment. All his writings served as a kind of judgment against a church that minimized the distance between the human and the divine. Kierkegaard believed that there was a great chasm between God and human beings and that the only bridge was Jesus Christ. In the period of history we call the Enlightenment (when reason seemed to triumph over faith and human potential over human weakness), Kierkegaard's philosophy served as a corrective to a world and a church that had lost its identity.

The following selection is a series of prayers found throughout Kierkegaard's many writings. It is instructive that a great philosopher whose writings comprise fourteen large volumes and range in subject matter from literature to theology would interject prayers in the midst of his discourses. Clearly he made no dichotomy between things sacred and things secular. For Kierkegaard the life of the mind and the life of devotion belonged together.

## THE PRAYERS OF KIERKEGAARD

### *Moved in Infinite Love*

You who are unchangeable, whom nothing changes! You who are unchangeable in love, precisely for our welfare, not submitting to any change: may we too will our welfare, submitting ourselves to the discipline of Your unchangeableness, so that we may in unconditional obedience find our rest and remain at rest in Your unchangeableness. You are not like us; if we are to preserve only some degree of constancy, we must not permit ourselves too much to be moved, nor by too many things. You on the contrary are moved, and moved in infinite love, by all things. Even that which we human beings call an insignificant trifle, and pass by unmoved, the need of a sparrow, even this moves You; and what we so often scarcely notice, a human sigh, this moves You, You who are unchangeable! You who in infinite love do submit to be moved, may this our prayer also move You to add Your blessing, in order that there may be brought about such a change in us who pray as to bring us into conformity with Your unchangeable will, You who are unchangeable!

### *You Have Loved Us First*

Father in Heaven! You have loved us first, help us never to forget that You are love so that this sure conviction might triumph in our hearts over the seduction of the world, over the inquietude of the soul, over the anxiety for the future, over the fright of the past, over the distress of the moment. But grant also that this conviction might discipline our soul so that our heart might remain faithful and sincere in the love which we bear to all those whom You have commanded us to love as we love ourselves.

You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You have only loved us first but a single time, rather than that without ceasing You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You – You are the first – You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at the same second turn my soul toward You in prayer, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are the first and thus forever. And yet we always speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once.

### *Have Then a Little Patience*

Father in Heaven! Show us a little patience; for we often intend in all sincerity to commune with You and yet we speak in such a foolish fashion. Sometimes, when we judge that what has come to us is good, we do not have enough words to thank You; just as a mistaken child is thankful for having gotten his own way. Sometimes things go so badly that we call upon You; just as an unreasoning child fears what would do him good. Oh, but if we are so childish, how far from being Your true children You who are our true Father, ah, as if an animal would pretend to have a man as a father. How childish we are and how little our proposals and our language resemble the language which we ought to use with You, we understand at least that it should not be this way and that we should be otherwise. Have then a little patience with us.

### *Hold Us Up Against Our Sins*

Father in Heaven! Hold not our sins up against us but hold us up against our sins so that the thought of You when it wakens in our soul, and each time it wakens, should not remind us of what we have committed but of what You did forgive, not of how we went astray but of how You did save us!

### *The Promise and the Pain*

Father in Heaven! We know indeed that seeking is never without its promise, how then could we fail to seek You, the author of all promises and the giver of all good gifts! We know well that the seeker does not always have to wander far afield since the more sacred the object of his search, the nearer it is to him; and if he seeks You, O God, You are of all things most near!

But we know also that the seeking is never without its pains and temptations, how then would there not be fear in seeking You, who are mighty! Even he who trusts in thought to his kinship with You does not venture forth without fear upon those crucial decisions of thought where, through doubt, he seeks to trace Your presence in the wise order of existence or, through despair, he seeks to trace You in the obedience under providence of rebellious events.

Those, whom You call Your friends, who walk in the light of Your countenance, they, too, not without trembling, seek the meeting of friendship with You who are alone are mighty. People of prayer who love with their whole heart – it is not without anxiety that they venture into the conflict of prayer with their God. The dying man, for whom You shift the scene, does not relinquish the temporal without a shudder when You call him. Not even the

child of woe, for whom the world has nothing but suffering, flees to You without fear, You who do not merely alleviate, but are all in all! How then should the sinner dare to seek You, O God of righteousness! But therefore he seeks You, not as these others do, but seeks You in the confession of sins.

### *The Sickness Unto Death*

Father in Heaven! To You the congregation often makes its petition for all who are sick and sorrowful, and when someone among us lies ill, alas, of mortal sickness, the congregation sometimes desires a special petition; grant that we may each one of us become in good time aware what sickness it is which is the sickness unto death and aware that we are all of us suffering from this sickness.

O Lord Jesus Christ, who came to earth to heal them that suffer from this sickness, from which, alas, we all suffer, but from which You are able to hear only those who are conscious they are sick in this way; help us in this sickness to hold fast to You, to the end that we may be healed of it.

O God the Holy Spirit, who comes to help us in this sickness if we honestly desire to be healed; remain with us so that for no single instant we may to our own destruction shun the Physician, but may remain with Him – delivered from sickness. For to be with him is to be delivered from our sickness, and when we are with Him we are saved from all sickness.

### *To Will One Thing*

Father in Heaven! What are we without You! What is all that we know, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if we do not know You! What is all our striving, could it ever encompass a world, but a half-finished work if we do not know You: You the One, who is one thing and who is all!

So may You give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing. In prosperity may You grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing.

You that gives both the beginning and the completion, may You early, at the dawn of day, give to the young the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may You give to the old a renewed remembrance of their first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing

Alas, but this has indeed not come to pass. Something has come in between. The separation of sin lies between. Each day, and day after day something is being placed in

between: delay, blockage, interruption, delusion, corruption. So in this time of repentance may You give the courage once again to will one thing.

True, it is an interruption of our ordinary tasks; we do lay down our work as though it were a day of rest when the penitent is alone before You in self-accusation. This is indeed an interruption. But it is an interruption that searches back into its very beginnings that it might bind up anew that which sin has separated, that in its grief it might atone for lost time, that in its anxiety it might bring to completion that which lies before it.

You that gives both the beginning and the completion, give your victory in the day of need so that what neither our burning wish nor our determined resolution may attain to, may be granted unto us in the sorrowing of repentance: to will only one thing.

### *Each Morning Broken*

Lord! Make our heart Your temple in which You live. Grant that every impure thought, every earthly desire might be like the idol Dagon – each morning broken at the feet of the Ark of the Covenant. Teach us to master flesh and blood and let this mastery of ourselves be our bloody sacrifice in order that we might be able to say with the Apostle: "I die every day."

## BIBLE SELECTION

### 1 Samuel 5 (NRSV)

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

The hand of the Lord was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and struck them with tumors, both in Ashdod and in its territory. And when the inhabitants of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for his hand is heavy on us and on our god Dagon." So they sent and gathered together all the Lords of the Philistines, and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?" The inhabitants of Gath replied, "Let the ark of God be moved on to us." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel to Gath. But after they had brought it to Gath, the hand of the Lord was against the city, causing a very great panic; he struck the inhabitants of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. So they sent the ark of the God of Israel to Ekron. But when the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "Why have they brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people?" They sent therefore and gathered together all the Lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there; those who did not die were stricken with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

## BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus, center me ..."

(Exhale) "... Towards your divine Kingdom."

## JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Kierkegaard writes that God not only loved us first once but loves us first all the time. How does this impact your understanding of your identity in God's eyes? How does it influence your approach to prayer?
2. Seeking God, as Kierkegaard writes, is filled with promises and pain. What pains have you encountered in your pursuit of God? How have these experiences shaped your life?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: A central theme in Kierkegaard's writings is the concept of willing one thing. For him, that one thing was to seek first the kingdom of God, to stay committed to God in all aspects of his life. Simplify your life this week by focusing on this one thing, trusting that all you need will be added unto you.

## REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

*It is a wonderful thing to see a first-rate philosopher at prayer. Tough-minded thinking and tenderhearted reverence are friends, not enemies. We have for too long separated the head from the heart, and we are the lesser for it.*

*We love God with the mind and we love God with the heart. In reality, we are descending with the mind into the heart and there standing before God in ceaseless wonder and endless praise. As the mind and the heart work in concert, a kind of "loving rationality" pervades all we say and do. This brings unity to us and glory to God.*

Excerpts taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.)