

3. Prayer

“I called to the LORD, out of my distress,
 and he answered me;
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
 and thou didst hear my voice.
 For thou didst cast me into the deep,
 into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood was round about me;
 all thy waves and thy billows
 passed over me.
 Then I said, ‘I am cast out
 from thy presence;
 how shall I again look
 upon thy holy temple?’
 The waters closed in over me,
 the deep was round about me;

weeds were wrapped about my head
 at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land
 whose bars closed upon me for ever;
 yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit,
 O LORD my God.
 When my soul fainted within me,
 I remembered the LORD;
 and my prayer came to thee,
 into thy holy temple.
 Those who pay regard to vain idols
 forsake their true loyalty.
 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
 will sacrifice to thee;
 what I have vowed I will pay.
 Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”
 (2:2-9)

So Jonah prayed. *That Jonah* prayed is not remarkable; we commonly pray when we are in desperate circumstances. But there is something very remarkable about the way Jonah prayed. He prayed a “set” prayer. Jonah’s prayer is not spontaneously original self-expression. It is totally derivative. Jonah had

been to school to learn to pray, and he prayed as he had been taught. His school was the Psalms.

The School of the Psalms

Line by line Jonah's prayer is furnished with the stock vocabulary of the Psalms:

- “my distress” from 18:6 and 120:1
- “Sheol” from 18:4-5
- “all thy waves and thy billows passed over me” from 42:7
- “from thy presence” from 139:7
- “upon thy holy temple” from 5:7
- “the waters closed in over me” from 69:2
- “my life from the Pit” from 30:3
- “my soul fainted within me” from 142:3
- “into thy holy temple” from 18:6
- “deliverance belongs to the LORD” from 3:8

And more. Not a word in the prayer is original. Jonah got every word — lock, stock, and barrel — out of his Psalms book.

But it is not only a matter of vocabulary, having words at hand for prayer. The form is also derivative. For the last hundred years scholars have given careful attention to the particular form that the psalms take (form criticism) and have arranged them in two large categories, laments and thanksgivings. The categories correspond to the two large conditions in which

we humans find ourselves, distress and well-being. Depending on circumstance and the state of our soul, we cry out in pain or burst forth with praise. The categories have subdivisions, each form identifiable by its stock opening, middle, and ending. The rhythms are set. The vocabulary is assigned.

This is amazing. Prayer, which we often suppose is truest when most spontaneous — the raw expression of our human condition without contrivance or artifice — shows up in Jonah when he is in the rawest condition imaginable as learned. Our surprise lessens when we consider language itself: we begin with inarticulate cries and coos, but after years of learning we become capable of crafting sonnets. Are infant sounds more honest than Shakespeare's sonnets? They are both honest, but the sonnets have far more experience in them. Honesty is essential in prayer, but we are after more. We are after as much of life as possible — *all* of life if possible — brought to expression in answering God. That means learning a form of prayer adequate to the complexity of our lives.

The commonest form of prayer in the Psalms is the lament. It is what we would expect, since it is our commonest condition. We are in trouble a lot, so we pray in the lament form a lot. A graduate of the Psalms School of Prayer would know this form best of all, by sheer force of repetition.

Jonah in the belly of the fish was in the worst trouble imaginable. We naturally expect him to pray a lament. What we get, though, is its opposite, a psalm of praise, in the standard thanksgiving form.^{[38](#)}

Something important is emerging here: Jonah had been to school to learn to pray, and he had learned his lessons well, but he was not a rote learner. His schooling had not stifled his creativity. He was able to discriminate between forms and chose to pray in a form that was at variance with his actual circumstances. Circumstances dictated “lament.” But prayer, while influenced by circumstances, is not determined by them. Jonah, creative in his praying, chose to pray in the form “praise.”

If we want to pray our true condition, our total selves in response to the living God, expressing our feelings is not enough — we need a long apprenticeship in prayer. And then we need graduate school. The Psalms are the school. Jonah in his prayer shows himself to have been a diligent student in the school of Psalms. His prayer is kicked off by his plight, but it is not reduced to it. His prayer took him into a world far larger than his immediate experience. He was capable of prayer that was adequate to the largeness of the God with whom he was dealing.

This contrasts with the prevailing climate of prayer. Our culture presents us with forms of prayer that are mostly self-expression — pouring ourselves out before God or lifting our gratitude to God as we feel the need and have the occasion. Such prayer is dominated by a sense of self. But prayer, mature prayer, is dominated by a sense of God. Prayer rescues us from a preoccupation with ourselves and pulls us into adoration of and pilgrimage to God. Pastors, who are vocationally immersed in so much *experience* —

people throbbing with pain, panicked in crisis, mired in confusion — are in particular need of such rescue.

My son, a writer, gave me a story that clarifies the distinction between culture-prayer and psalm-prayer. He was teaching a creative writing course at the University of Colorado. Students typically enroll in such courses because they want to be creative. As they hand in their early attempts at creative writing, the poems and stories reek of self-absorption. They are narcissists one and all and suppose that writing is a way of becoming better narcissists. Everything is reduced to and then recast in terms of their own experience.

Real writers know that is not the way it works. While personal experience often provides the material and the impetus — how can it be otherwise? — the act of writing is primarily an exploration of a larger world, entering into more reality, getting away from ourselves, moving beyond ourselves into other lives, other worlds. It is, precisely, creative: bringing into being something that was not there before. Meanwhile, my son, reading these stories and poems, was getting thoroughly bored.

In a moment of inspired desperation, he took them out of the classroom one day and marched them across the street to a cemetery. They spent the hour walking over the graves, among the tombstones, reading the epigraphs and taking notes on what they observed and what they imagined. They were then instructed to write stories or poems out of the cemetery. It worked. There were glimmerings of genuine

creativity. The writers were imaginatively entering into a world other than the self, an immensely larger world, even though it was only a cemetery. They wrote themselves into more reality.

The Psalms are the cemetery in which our Lord the Spirit leads us to get us out of ourselves, to rescue our prayers from self-absorption and set us on the way to God-responsiveness.

The Psalms are the school for people learning to pray. Fundamentally, prayer is our response to the God who speaks to us. God's word is always first. He gets the first word in, always. We answer. We come to consciousness in a world addressed by God. We need to learn how to answer, really answer — not merely say Yessir, Nosir - our whole beings in response. How do we do this? We don't know the language. We are so underdeveloped in this God-addressed world. We learn well enough how to speak to our parents and pass examinations in our schools and count out the right change at the drugstore, but answering *God*? Are we going to make do by trial and error? Are we going to get by on what we overhear in the streets? Israel and Church put the Psalms into our hands and say, "Here, this is our text. Practice these prayers so that you will learn the full range and the vast depth of your lives in response to God."³⁹

For eighteen hundred years virtually every church used this text. Only in the last couple of hundred years has it been discarded in favor of trendy devotional aids, psychological moodbenders, and walks on a moonlit beach.

The Psalms, of course, are not "devotional," or "psychological," or "romantic." They are no use at all to us in any of these departments. Their use is as an element of *askesis*, a form for our formlessness.

For there is no lack in us of the impulse to pray. And there is no scarcity of requests to pray. Desire and demand keep the matter of prayer before us constantly. So why are so many lives prayerless? Simply because "the well is deep and you have nothing to draw with." We need a bucket. We need a container that holds water. Desires and demands are a sieve. We need a vessel suited to lowering desires and demands into the deep Jacob's Well of God's presence and word and bringing them to the surface again. The Psalms are such a bucket. They are not the prayer itself but the most adequate container, *askesis*, for prayer that has ever been devised. Refusal to use this psalms-bucket, once we comprehend its function, is willfully wrong-headed. It is not impossible, perhaps, to construct a container of a different shape and material that will serve makeshift. It has certainly been done often enough. But why settle for such as that when we have this magnificently designed and spaciously proportioned container given to us and at hand?