

C.S. Lewis on Prayer
Dr. Art Lindsley

PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER

Prayer was an important part of C.S. Lewis's life. But problems he had with prayer as a boy initially led to the loss of whatever nominal faith he had. When he was young (about nine years old), his mother died. He says in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*:

With my mother's death all settled happiness disappeared from my life. There was much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.

At this point he lost not only his mother but also, in effect, his father. Albert Lewis became emotionally withdrawn and decided to send both sons to boarding school, an experience that proved very difficult for both boys. Warren Lewis later wrote, "With his uncanny flair for making the wrong decision, my father had given us helpless children into the hands of a madman." The boarding school's headmaster, whom the students called "Oldie," inflicted harsh punishment on those who failed their lessons. He was later declared insane, and the school was closed.

During this period Lewis attended church and attempted to take the Christian faith seriously. He tried to pray every night but developed what he called a "false conscience" about prayer. He had been told that it was not enough to say your prayers; you also had to

think about what you were saying. As soon as he finished his prayers each night, he would ask himself, “Are you sure you were thinking about what you were saying?” The answer was inevitably no. Then he would say his prayers again, sometimes multiple times. The result was insomnia and nightly torment. Lewis wrote, “Had I pursued the same road much further, I think I should have gone mad.” Because of this kind of struggle, he sometimes wrote about prayer – devoting a book to overcoming difficulties titled, *Letters to Malcom* (published after he died).

After he came to faith in Christ, there were many times when it was business as usual, where he attended chapel regularly, read the Bible, and said his prayers. We will discuss this a little later in this article. However, there were other times when he struggled to understand God’s ways, especially after the death of his wife, Joy. Under the weight of grief he was experiencing, he had hoped to find closeness with God in prayer. Instead, he experienced a devastating distance from God, what the sixteenth century monk, John of the Cross, called the “dark night of the soul.” Lewis wrote (in *A Grief Observed*), “But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”

A while later, Lewis did come through the time of darkness and desertion, and reconnected with God. The door was no longer shut and bolted. He wondered:

Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face?

The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God cannot give it. You are like the drowning man who cannot be helped because he clutches or grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.

Gradually he was restored to a sense of closeness with God. But, he came to realize that some of the prayers and petitions he made to God contained questions that were unanswerable even by God:

When I lay these questions before God, I get no answer. But a rather special sort of “No answer.” It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though he shook his head not in refusal but waving the question, like, “Peace, child; you don’t understand.” Can a mortal ask questions that God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask – half our great theological and metaphysical problems – are like that.

Lewis's faith was gradually restored to its robust quality as we can see in the end of *A Grief Observed* and in his final book, *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer*. He had suffered his worst pain and come out stronger on the other side.

PRAYER AND LIFE

Jim Houston, founder of the C.S. Lewis Institute, knew C.S. Lewis when they both taught at Oxford. Jim says that Lewis did not talk about his own personal prayer life, partially because he was shy and also because it was often inappropriate to discuss such things at Oxford. Even when Houston met Lewis to talk about daily prayer meetings at the Christian Union, Lewis didn't volunteer personal details. However, later he did write about such subjects in essays titled, "Work and Prayer," "The Efficacy of Prayer," "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer," and in his final book, *Letters to Malcom*.

Lewis felt that prayer was not primarily something to talk about but something to "do." He says,

For many years after my conversion, I never used any ready made forms except the Lord's Prayer. In fact, I tried to pray without words at all – not to verbalize the mental acts. Even in praying for others I believe I tended to avoid their names and substituted mental images of them. I still think that the prayer without words is the best – if one can really achieve it."

Lewis's routine involved rising about 7 a.m., taking a walk, attending chapel at 8 a.m., having breakfast, with tutorials beginning at 9 a.m. Later in the day, he would take long walks around the college grounds (of his college) or in the area surrounding his home. This gave him time for meditation and prayer. He recommended that any other time was better for prayer than just before bed. He said, "I'd rather pray sitting in a crowded train than to put it off till midnight when one reaches a hotel bedroom with aching back and dry throat, and one's mind partly in a stupor and partly in a whirl." After he left Oxford to teach at Cambridge, he had a long train ride back and forth and liked to use the time for meditation and prayer. The train was slow, but that was a good thing, "Just because the service is so slow and therefore in most people's eyes bad, these trains are almost empty – I get through a lot of reading and sometimes say my prayers. A solitary train journey I find quite excellent for this purpose."

THOUGHTS ON PRAYER

The key to prayer for Lewis was the struggle of getting the "real I" in touch with the reality of God. Prayer is saying, "may it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to." God is the great Iconoclast, smashing all our false images and conceptions about Him (and about ourselves). Then we can move towards a real and true spirituality.

Another emphasis of Lewis was that through prayer God allows us the dignity of causality. Prayer changes things. Several times Lewis recites the *Pensees* of Pascal: "God

instituted prayer in order to lend his creatures the dignity of causality.” Prayer and work go together. We need to pray while we work and continue praying when we cannot work. Sometimes people ask, “If God is sovereign, then why pray?” Lewis responds in a letter:

The efficacy of prayer is, at any rate, no more of a problem than the efficacy of all human acts, i.e. if you say “It is useless to pray because Providence knows what is best and will certainly do it,” then why is it not equally useless (and for the same reason) to try to alter the course of events in any way whatever?

In another passage in *God in the Dock*, Lewis says:

“Praying for particular things,” said I, “always seems to be like advising God how to run the world. Wouldn’t it be wiser to assume that He knows best?” “On the same principle,” said he, “I suppose you never ask a man next to you to pass the salt, because God knows best whether you ought to have salt or not. And suppose you never take an umbrella because God knows best whether you ought to be wet or dry?” “That’s quite different,” I protested. “I don’t see why,” said he. “The odd thing is that He should let us influence the course of events at all. But since He lets us do

it in one say, I don't see why He shouldn't let us do it in the other."

In one essay, "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer," (in *Christian Reflections*) Lewis discusses the tension between two prayer patterns. Type "A" is illustrated by Jesus in the Garden. "Thy will be done." Type "B" is the prayer of faith to "move mountains." Lewis says:

There are, no doubt, passages in the New Testament which may seem at first sight to promise an invariable granting of our prayers. But that cannot be what they really mean. For in the very heart of the story we meet a glaring instance to the contrary. In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that, the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick, is dismissed."

Several times, Lewis comments along these lines, "If God had granted all the silly prayer I've made in my life, where should I be now?" Perhaps the tension between Type A and Type B prayer is reconciled by praying in the Spirit. Even though we may desire one outcome (it would be easier for us), the Spirit intercedes through our prayers according to the will of God (Rom. 8.2) for another outcome.

Much more could be written about prayer in C.S. Lewis's life. Particularly read *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer*. Lewis was faithful in prayer but he wrestled with some of the tensions we encounter when we pray. On the other hand, he often had simple advice, like "We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."