



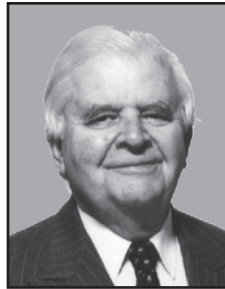
The Prayer-Life of C.S. Lewis

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Prayer, perhaps more than anything else, is a true test of a Christian's devotion and intimacy with God. Its presence in a Christian's life says it all. Its absence is the evidence of a merely theoretical framework of faith. So to try to enter into the understanding of Lewis' prayer-life is an attempt to penetrate his very mind and spirit in the most intimate way. Can we do so without presumption? Is it speculative to try to do so? I knew Lewis personally, enough to have a clear impression of his personal faith in the years between 1946 and 1953, when we met in a group discussion that was held in the home that I shared with Nicholas Zernov, during those years. Zernov was then leader of the Society of St. Albans and St. Sergius. It was through him that I got to know Lewis.



James M. Houston

While he was a witty raconteur and provocative debater, Lewis was essentially shy about his inner life, so it would be an impossible task to describe his prayer-life unless he had written significantly about prayer. But he made a substantial contribution to the theology of prayer. His last work, published posthumously, *Letters to Malcolm*, he completed in April 1963, just seven months before his death. It deals frankly with issues that he faced privately in prayer. His *Reflections on the Psalms*, published two years earlier, deal with his personal difficulties in reading the Psalms, and also his appreciation of the Christian liturgy of the Psalter. But Lewis was never enthusiastic about his own church life, which in the setting of college chapel was atypical of parish life. So his own focus upon prayer was more personal than corporate. Several of his essays, notably "Work and Prayer" and "The Efficacy of Prayer," challenge us with specific issues of personal prayer. His autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, and *The Screwtape Letters* also contain personal comments on prayer.

In my own encounters with Lewis, he never spoke about prayer. I did communicate once with him directly about the daily prayer meetings of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union where much prayer had been made for the conversion of Sheldon Vanauken, whose wife was active in our prayer-group. Indeed, I told Lewis of Sheldon's conversion the day after it happened. But Lewis was never forthcoming about his own prayer life. A shy man, he was all the more sensitive to the Oxford atmosphere then prevailing, that you no more discussed religion too intimately than you talked about your kidneys. So he simply responded positively to Vanauken's news as a confidant who expected it anyway.

Lewis suffered enough from the cynical reactions of some of his colleagues when his first religious books were published. For he, an English don, should not be dabbling in theology, much less getting cheap publicity in this way. To trespass into another academic discipline was questionable to say the least. So Lewis was very careful to introduce his own theological views modestly, though he did have the support of his friend Austin Farrar and other theologians when he did so. In his *Reflections on the Psalms* he begins, "I write as one amateur to another, talking about difficulties that I have met, or lights I have gained, reading the Psalms, with the hope this might at any rate interest and sometimes even help, other inexpert readers. I am 'comparing notes,' not presuming to instruct."¹ It is only now that some of us have wakened up to the fact that if all of life is carved up among the professions, so that there is likewise no room left for being dilettantes or amateurs in the arts or culture generally, then we shall all be cheated of humanness itself. Lewis got away with it in his day, for when he was questioned about his preaching as a layman at RAF stations during the Battle of Britain, he could genuinely reply he was just doing his war work, like any other old don who did his duties as an air-raid warden, certainly not very trained but doing his best in an emergency. In such a crisis there is no need for any

further apology than what he writes in the preface to his published BBC talks given during the war, when he first came to public attention:

There is no mystery about my position. I am a very ordinary layman, of the Church of England, not especially 'high' nor especially 'low,' nor especially anything else.²

When I first met him in the 1940s he looked like Mr. Badger from *The Wind in the Willows*³: stout, in an old rumpled brown tweed jacket, brown shoes, pipe in mouth, looking like an Oxford farmer. However, once he began to speak, I realized that few people I had ever met, other than perhaps his friend Dyson, could articulate so well, so humorously, and exactly to the point.

In this paper, I want to describe six traits that I think characterize the personal prayer-life of Lewis, and then to look at three aspects of his own theological reflections on prayer.

1. *The Earthy Realism of His Prayer-Life*

Lewis was no mystic. He admits this several times in his letters. Others might climb daringly in the mountains of mysticism, but he simply slogged around in the foothills. Rather than, his spirituality is earthy, full of realism, for he was dead scared of sentimentalism. It was expressive of a no-nonsense kind of faith. The first poem of his collection edited after his death spells out his similar poetic credo:

I am so coarse, the things the poets see
Are obstinately invisible to me.
For twenty years I've stared my level best
To see if evening — any evening — would suggest
A patient etherized upon a table;
In vain. I simply wasn't able.
To me each evening looked far more
Like the departure from a silent, yet crowded shore
Of a ship whose freight with everything, leaving
behind
Gracefully, finally without farewells, marooned
mankind —
I'm like that odd man Wordsworth knew, to whom
A primrose was a yellow primrose, one whose
doom
Keeps him for ever in the list of dunces,
Compelled to live on stock responses,
Making the poor best that I can
Of dull things...⁴

Lewis is admitting to us all that his spirituality, like his poetry, is prosaic, ordinary, about the world around him. This down-to-earthness about him, is

perhaps the greatest impression he left upon me. Neo-platonism was anathema to Lewis. So instead of saying "we must be spiritually regenerated," he confesses, "we're like eggs at present. And you can't go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."⁵ Thus his style is vivid, concrete, practical, empty of "gas," full of solid stuff. So too his faith is all for "sound doctrine," not the woolly-mindedness of contemporaries he debated with, who wanted "religion without dogma." Growing up as a child in a "low" church milieu, he felt later that it did tend to be too cosily living at ease in Zion,⁶ not the tough, realistic faith and prayer-life Lewis was to develop later.

2. *The Practical Realism of His Prayer-Life*

Prayer is not something simply to talk about. It is not even something we "do," for Lewis. "Saying one's prayers" was for Lewis only a small part of his experience of prayer. "For many years after my conversion," he admits, "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."⁷ But we have to remember that our exercise of prayer is only effective as we take ourselves as we really are, and not idealize how we would like to be, and thus try and exercise an unrealistic form of expressing prayer. So Lewis had to learn himself, that "to pray successfully without words one needs to be at 'the top of one's form.'"⁸ Thinking that we can do always, what we can do on occasion, is an error that makes our prayers also unrealistic, and this Lewis had to discover, as we all must.

The practical rhythm of Lewis was simple enough each day. He would rise at about 7 a.m., take a walk, attend matins at 8 a.m. in college chapel, breakfast, and start tutorials at 9 a.m. Late in the afternoon he would make time for prayerful thought and contemplation, as he walked around the college grounds. Never would he recommend saying one's prayers last thing at night. "No one in his senses if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bed-time — obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration. My own plan when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however unsuitable, in preference to the last waking moment. On a day of travelling...I'd rather pray sitting in a crowded train than 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."⁹ In a letter to a friend in 1955, that is to say shortly after he had taken up his

professorship at Cambridge, when he used to return home to Oxford at weekends, he said:

Oddly enough, the week-end journeys (to and from Cambridge) are no trouble at all. I find myself perfectly content in a slow train that crawls through green fields stopping at every station. 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.¹⁰

All this is consistent with Lewis' earlier observations, that much of prayer is really a disposition of heart that is in tune with God's presence in one's life, so that the more our hearts are in tune with and obedient toward God, the less fuss do we need to make about how vocal and articulate we are in "saying our prayers"; provided, of course, that we do not succumb to merely having "warm feelings" or vaguely imaginative thoughts we mistake for real communion with God. This will always demand the most rigorous attentiveness and serious intent to be called real prayer.

3. *His Natural, Simple, Unstructured Attitude to Prayer*

As we have noted, Lewis was a private person, concealing his soul in the midst of convivial friendships. He remarked on one occasion that friends are not like lovers who look at each other, but in what they hold in common. So friendships were outward looking, not introspective for him. Several times he observes the importance of "looking at," rather than looking "through" things. So he would never have analyzed his prayer-life as we are attempting to do. He would bury us in a loud guffaw of the absurdity of such action.

While still agnostic, in October 1929, Lewis read the *Diary of an Old Soul* by George MacDonald. "He seems to know everything," Lewis confided to Greeves, "and I find my own experience in it constantly."

My surgent thought shoots lark-like up to Thee,
Thou like the heaven art all about the lark.
Whatever I surmise or know in me,
Idea, or symbol on the dark,
Is living, working, thought-creating power
In Thee, the timeless Father of the hour.
I am Thy book, Thy song – Thy child would be.¹¹

By the following summer term he had also perused *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence, and *Centuries of Meditation* by Thomas Traherne. By the following term he was attending 8 a.m. chapel

regularly. But on Christmas Eve, 1930, he writes his friend Greeves, "I think the trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God's existence; but the irrational deadweight of my old sceptical habits, and the spirit of the age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feelings of the truth; and often when I pray, I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address."¹² The reason for the remoteness of Lewis' faith at that time was he was still a deist rather than a Christian. So after a long talk one night with Tolkien and Dyson in July 1931, Lewis wrote Greeves further: "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ – in Christianity – my long talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a great deal to do with it."¹³ Later that year he also read William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Lewis was now finding it meaningful to pray for his brother Warren in Shanghai. So he wrote to him at the end of 1931:

When you ask me to pray for you – I don't know if you are serious, but the answer is yes, I do. It may not do you any good, but it does me a lot, for I cannot ask for any change to be made in you without finding that the very same needs to be made in me; which pulls me up also by putting us all in the same boat, checks any tendency to priggishness.¹⁴

All this may seem to be biography about prayer rather than theology. But to Lewis the one was impossible without the other. To look at prayer in detachment from its exercise was inconceivable. And since most of one's existence is usually pretty dull and routine stuff, one's prayers are not exceptional either. Indeed, the more honest we become with ourselves, the more "normal" our prayer life will be. As Lewis said early on in his BBC talks on Christian morality, at first Christianity seems to be all about rules and regulations, guilt and virtue, only to find its members are really living in another country. "Every one is filled full with what we would call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they don't call it goodness. They don't call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes."¹⁵ So too, in prayer, Lewis sees that it should become so natural to the believer, that we do not make any fuss about it, but simply do it because that is the nature of the Christian life. Speaking about the struggles we may have in prayer, the distractions and dryness in our lives, he comments: "The disquieting thing is not simply that we skimp and begrudge the duty of prayer. The really disquieting thing is that it should have to be numbered among duties at all. For we believe that we were created to glorify God

and enjoy Him forever. And if the few, the very few, minutes we now spend on intercourse with God are a burden to us rather than a delight, what then?...if we were perfected, prayer would not be a duty, it would be a delight."¹⁶ Clearly our sins handicap us from the openness that prayer requires, while the unreality of the unseen realm of prayer only shows how distant we may be from God and his ways. Like friendship with a dear friend, however, prayer is never forced nor irksome. It grows as the relationship grows too.

4. *Supplicatory Prayers for Others*

Praying for his brother was perhaps the first step that Lewis made in supplication for many other people throughout the rest of his life. In the correspondence to an "American Lady," begun in October 1950, we read Lewis promising again and again, "I will have you in my prayers," "of course we'll help each other in our prayers," "let us continue to pray for each other," "of course I have been praying for you daily, as always, but latterly have found myself doing so with much more concern." On this last occasion, he narrates an event that was of special circumstance. He had felt one night with strong feeling how good it would be to hear from her with good news. "Then, as if by magic (indeed it is the whitest magic in the world) the letter comes today. Not (lest I should indulge in folly) that your relief had not occurred before my prayer, but as if, in tenderness for my puny faith, God moved me to pray with special earnestness just before He was going to give me the thing. How true that prayers are His prayers really: He speaks to Himself through us."¹⁷

Lewis was not prepared merely to hold that while petitionary prayer is expressing personal need before God, supplication is praying on behalf of others. Early on he had seen that to supplicate for others to be changed by prayer, implied the pray-er was also willing to see changes in his life as he prayed for others. But petition and supplication are also part of a greater, more mysterious reality of divine soliloquy, since God intends to be not merely "all" as pantheism declares, but "all in all." If the Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us and gives us the gift of prayer itself, are we not in our supplications and petitions actually entering into divine soliloquy, to celebrate the sovereign good that God has intended for all his creatures? So Lewis quotes a poem he found in an old notebook, author unknown, to illustrate this.

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem
To be in speech with you,
Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream,
One talker aping two.

Sometimes it is, yet not as they
Conceive it. Rather, I
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say
But lo!, my springs are dry.

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake
The listener's role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply
Nor can; thus, while we seem
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I
No dreamer, but thy dream.¹⁸

"Dream" does suggest pantheism, so Lewis adds, perhaps it is more accurate to call it rather "soliloquy." In fact, Lewis sent Bede Griffiths this poem in 1938, to describe the growing convictions of what prayer meant in his life.¹⁹ For this reason, he worked over this poem several times.²⁰

5. *Prayer as Friendship with God*

Perhaps many of us find that the growth of prayer is also associated with the cultivation of friendships. It is as if the relational quality of life that is nurtured and cultivated in personal friendships on the horizontal level of companionship assists us also to deepen friendship with God in prayer on the vertical level. This, then, is another trait of Lewis. He grew in prayer as he grew into friendships. Sometimes they were boon companionships, at other times they sprung from correspondence with strangers who became real friends, like "the American Lady." Perhaps too, as Lewis leaned on confidants in his distresses, so he should reach out to others in their needs too. "Forgiveness," he once said, "is another name for being forgiven." This reciprocity explains perhaps the largesse he gave to others in his enormous correspondence, indicative of what he felt he received from his trust in God.

So at the outbreak of the war in 1939, he wrote to his old pupil and friend Bede Griffiths, "I was terrified to find how fearful I was by the crisis. Pray for me for courage."²¹ Again he writes to him in 1954, "I had prayed hard for a couple of nights before that my faith might be strengthened. The response was immediate, and your book gave the finishing touch" (that is, *The Golden String*, Griffiths' autobiography).²² Again, on December 20, 1961, Lewis wrote Griffiths after his wife's death: "I prayed when I buried my wife, my whole sexual nature should be buried with her, and it seems it has happened. Thus one recurrent trial

has vanished from my life – an enormous liberty. Of course, this may be old age....”²³

Another special friend was Sister Penelope Lawson. His first letter to her he wrote in 1939, saying: “Though I’m forty years old, I’m only about twelve as a Christian.... So it would be a maternal act if you found time sometimes to mention me in your prayers.”²⁴ Then on October 24, 1940, he told her: “I’m going to make my first confession next week, which will seem an odd experience. The decision to do so was one of the hardest I have ever made; but now that I am committed (by dint of posting the letter before I had time to change my mind) I began to be afraid of the opposite extreme – afraid that I was merely indulging in an orgy of egoism.”²⁵ A month later, he wrote again to say, “well – we have come through the wall of fire, and find ourselves (somewhat to our surprise) still alive and even well. The story about an orgy of egoism turns out, like all the Enemy propaganda, to have just a grain of truth in it, but I have no doubt that the proper method of dealing with that is to continue the practice as I intend to do. For after all, everything – even virtue, even prayer – has its dangers and if one heeds the grain of truth in the Enemy propaganda, one can never do anything at all.”²⁶

A particular thorn in the flesh for Lewis was Mrs. Moore, who was the mother of a friend killed in the First World War, and with whom Lewis had had an unfortunate romance that turned sour. She continued to live with Lewis and his brother for many years, and her last years in the household got progressively worse. During one particular crisis over her, Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope, “It was a bad time, but I almost venture to say I felt Christ in the house as I have never done before.” Signing himself “Brother Ass,” he added contritely, “but alas such a house for Him to visit!” Years before his brother had wistfully compared their own troubled household with that of the Dysons, where life seemed one long series of delightful picnics! So again Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope on January 3, 1945: “Pray for me, I am suffering incessant temptations to uncharitable thoughts at present; one of those black moods in which nearly all one’s friends seem to be selfish or even false. And how terrible that there should be even a kind of pleasure in thinking evil.”²⁷ As Mrs. Moore sunk into senility and kept the household in constant discord, he wrote, I have been feeling that very much lately: that cheerful insecurity is what our Lord asks of us.”²⁸ Again, on June 5, 1951, Lewis wrote her “I especially need your prayers because I am (like the pilgrim in Bunyan) travelling across a plain called Ease! Everything without, and many things within, are marvelously well at

present.”²⁹ It was at this time that he began to think of writing a book on prayer.

Perhaps it began to dawn upon him that he could not do this without more experience of its reality in his own life, for on February 15, 1954, Lewis wrote again to Sister Penelope, “I have had to abandon the book on prayer, it was clearly not for me.”³⁰ He kept this postponement for the next nine years of his life, indeed to the year he died. But while he was writing it, his wife Joy Davidman commented how excited she was about his project, as perhaps one of the most important things Lewis would ever do.

6. *Prayer-Life is Matured by Suffering*

Perhaps in the meantime, Lewis began to think of what was involved symbolically in the change of locale from Magdalen College, Oxford, to Magdalene College, Cambridge. “My address will be Magdalene, so I remain under the same patroness,” he wrote to Sister Penelope on July 30, 1954. “This is nice because it saves ‘admin.’ readjustments in Heaven.” At the end of the year, he wrote to his friend Veto Gebbert, “I think I shall like Magdalene better than Magdalen.” “It is a tiny college (a perfect cameo architecturally) and they’re so old-fashioned, pious, and gentle and conservative – unlike this leftist, atheist, cynical, hard-boiled, huge Magdalen” that had caused Lewis so much hurt.³¹ In a letter to Bede Griffiths on November 1st, he asked: “Has any theologian (perhaps dozens) allegorized St. Mary Magdalene’s act in the following way, which came to me like a flash of lightning the other day!... The precious alabaster box which we have to break over the holy feet is her heart. It seems so obvious, once one has thought of it.”³²

So Lewis had come to see that prayer grows in the breaking of the human heart before God. His perhaps was broken since Oxford never recognized his worth to offer him a university professorship, and later still, it was broken again by the far more poignant grief of losing his wife in bereavement. Like all of us do, Lewis continued to struggle with God when,

By now I should be entering on the supreme stage
Of the whole walk, reserved for the late afternoon.
The heat was over now; the anxious mountains,
The airless valleys and the sun-baked rocks,
behind me....³³

Yet in June 18, 1962, he writes: “the plumbing often goes wrong.... I need to be near a life-line.”³⁴ Worse was to come.

After the loss of his wife, he asks the raw and naked question:

Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in 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. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it even inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?³⁵

In times of such bitter sorrow, Lewis admitted that “I am not in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him.”³⁶

Of this we're certain; no one who dared knock
At heaven's door for earthly comfort found
Even a door—only smooth, endless rock,
And save the echo of his voice no sound.
It's dangerous to listen; you'll begin
To fancy that those echoes (hope can play
Pitiful tricks) are answers from within;
Far better to turn, grimly sane away.
Heaven cannot thus, Earth cannot ever, give
The thing we want. We ask what isn't there
And by our asking water and make live
That very part of love which must despair,
And die, and go down cold into the earth,
Before there's talk of springtide and re-birth.³⁷

Yes, this is perhaps one of the deepest experiences of prayer, to be able to say to our Heavenly Father, “Lord, not my will but thine be done.”

Lewis' Theology of Prayer

If Lewis' personal experience of prayer has these six traits—an earthy realism, a practical import, a natural and simple attitude, a strong supplicatory concern for others, warm and honest expressions of friendships, and matured by suffering—how do these characteristics shape his theology of prayer? Perhaps two features he stressed most in his writings were: the problem of causality in prayer, and the nature of petitionary prayer. But like other human beings he had first to overcome morbid experiences of childhood before he could enter into a more truthful realism

about the nature and exercise of prayer, so this we must consider as a necessary prelude.

A child tends to relate to God, as he relates with his parents. This correlation, unless corrected and healed, may persist, unconsciously so, throughout life. “My real life—or what memory reports as my real life—was increasingly one of solitude,” Lewis reports. He had bad dreams, “like a window opening on what was hardly less than Hell.”³⁸ As a child of seven, he admits “solitude was nearly always at my command, somewhere in the garden, or somewhere in the house....What drove me to write was the extreme manual clumsiness from which I suffered,” so that he hated sports. His early years he described as “living almost entirely in my imagination,” or at least “the imagination of those years now seems to me more important than anything else.”³⁹ Then at the age of ten his mother died. He remembered what he had been taught, that prayer offered in faith would be answered. Then when she died he shifted his ground to believe he now needed to believe in a miracle, seeing God merely as a Magician. It left him with theological confusion about God for years to come. All happiness left him, and like the solid continent of Atlantis that disappeared under the waves, “all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life...it was all sea and islands now.”⁴⁰

At boarding school later, Lewis says he began “seriously to pray and read my Bible and to attempt to obey my conscience.”⁴¹ But his slight alienation from his distanced father increased, and there was emotionally no solid ground for the child. Sometimes he would awake at night afraid that his only brother had slipped off with his father to America, and left him behind. His prayers became sheer acts of despair. Having said them at night, his conscience would whisper he had not said them properly enough, so he would try and try again until he fell asleep in frustration and lack of abiding assurance. A deepening pessimism eventually led him at university to decide he was an atheist, which for many has been the cold comfort of forgetting God in a conversion of relief. Perhaps the dread of frustrated prayers at night-time never fully left him, and the issues of a reasoning faith about prayer were colored perhaps as much from his early alienation as from his heightened intellectual search for the appropriate enquiry that would serve the logic of the mind, more than the rest of the heart. Perhaps Lewis' cure was to rest in the presence of God, rather than be always enquiring about its appropriateness.

1. Lewis' Emphasis upon "Festoonings in Prayer"

The bad situations of imagination and conscience that Lewis had placed himself in, as a child, explain perhaps the emphasis he placed later in life upon the

importance of placing one's self in what he called "prayerful situations," or "festoonings." Perhaps he learnt this from his own failures as a child to ever pray "properly" at all. Francis de Sales might also have helped him when he advises that in meditation, "place yourself in the presence of God." In honest humility, Lewis also learnt to see that at prayer one is in a more "real" situation than ever one could be in the "real world." Prayer is the struggle to come to grips with "rock-bottom realities." Prayer, then is the struggle for the "real I" to meet with the reality of God. Prayer then is saying, "may it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to." This is the prayer that precedes all prayers. Then, as the great Iconoclast, God in his mercy may shatter all our false ideas and conceptions of him, that so hinder our real prayer in life.

Another area where "festoonings" of prayer are needed is in the realm of causality. Several times in his writings, Lewis recites the *Pensées* of Pascal: "God instituted prayer in order to lend his creatures the dignity of causality." Lewis' comment is that God perhaps "invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose."⁴² For God has granted us the dignity of both work and prayer together. So a proper attitude to both is to pray as we work responsibly with the gifts that God has given to us, as well as to go on praying when we can work no more. Indeed, prayer is a stronger force than causality, not a weaker form. For if it "works" at all, it does so unlimited by space and time. Prayer then, is not a direct action over nature, it is action in co-operation with God, so we are most in harmony with God's provident action when we are in prayer before him. Perhaps the post-Einsteinian worldview ahead of us, still little appreciated in Lewis' day, now frees us from being so "hung up" with causality, as some of his contemporaries were, but neither is God. Our relationship with God in faith that pleases him, is therefore still the vital prayerful situation for all praying.

2. Lewis and Petitionary Prayer

Wisely then, Lewis argues that it is a wrong kind of question to ask, "Does prayer work?" It misleads us about the true nature of prayer. The quiet composure of heart before God rests in a relationship that is deeper, far deeper than words can ever express. This is where Lewis so clearly rested, and explains why so little need be said really about prayer. It is to be experienced rather than superficially talked about. At the same time Lewis honestly had difficulty with the apparently inconsistent character of petitions he noted in the gospels. For he observed two different types of prayer which appear inconsistent with each other.⁴³ Type A is the prayer taught by our Lord: "Thy

will be done." In the light of the great submission of his passion, nothing can be asked for conditionally, only submissively so. It is asked in the Garden of Gethsemane, without any reservation whatever: "nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done." Type B is the petition in faith, able to "move mountains," to heal people, to remove blindness, and do much else. The apostle seems to advocate it when he urges us to "ask in faith, nothing doubting" (James 1:6-8).

Lewis asked many wise people about this apparent inconsistency and received no clear answer or solution. Hesitantly, Lewis suggested himself that until God has given us the faith to move mountains, it is perhaps to leave them alone, for he created them, and that is his business. Instead, it is advisable to concentrate more attention on Type A prayers, that indicate the surrender of self-will and self-love is more important than getting our own way, for we can easily misinterpret our perception of things in foolish, willful ways. Perhaps what Jesus actually did when he prayed submissively as he did on the night of his betrayal, was actually to identify himself with our weakness, so that even the certitude of the Father's will was withdrawn from him, so that in his extreme humiliation, Jesus prayed as we tend to pray in our weakness. Our struggles may be, says Lewis, to even believe that God is a Listener, not just that he is an Enabler.

Thus Lewis remained modest, extremely so, about his prayer life. Perhaps nothing keeps us humbler than a healthy realism about the inadequacy of our personal relationship with God. Lewis knew times of dryness in his prayer life, what the medieval monks used to call *accidie*. He warns us wisely against viewing our prayer life in relation to our emotions. "Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself," wrote Screwtape to his assistant Wormwood, "we are defeated." The Devil's advice to his evil apprentice is to distract their attention from God himself, to their feelings about God. "So when they ask for charity, let them also be deflected by having charitable feelings. When they pray for courage, let them feel brave. When they seek forgiveness, divert them with feelings about forgiveness. Teach them to eliminate the value of each prayer by the success in producing the desired feeling."⁴⁴ At all costs avoid the real nakedness of the soul before God in prayer. It is that, argued Screwtape, that is so deadly, of being in the living Presence of God himself.

These then, are some of the things Lewis teaches us by his life and honest reflections. They are home-spun, for the truth is always simple, if it is lived rather than being mere theory. As the primary language of the soul, prayer is like saying the alphabet. It may not appear very profound to describe, yet it is essential, the basis

of all communication with God, that leads us forward into mysteries yet unknown and still to be experienced. In the mercy of God, he takes our childhood wounds and memories, to show us how deeply we need to ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." Then in the lessons he gives us through the lives of others, as well as our own, he unfolds the most wonderful journey for the soul we could ever conceive. Little did Lewis realize as a child where that journey would take him. Nor can we. But prayer remains its pulse-beat. We give the last word to Lewis about his own experiences of prayer. "Prayer," he says, "in the sense of asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us. That he answers prayer is a corollary – not necessarily the most important one – from the revelation. What He does is learned from what He is."⁴⁵

Notes

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28. Ibid., p. 316
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43. See the essay "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer", in *C.S. Lewis, Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), pp. 142-151.
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