

## The PAPA Prayer

Ever since I've been a Christian, I've asked God for lots of things He hasn't given. There have been times I've begged God for clear guidance on how to handle messy relationships or on what direction to move in a confusing situation, and it never came. I could name a dozen nasty spots in my life, probably more, when I've felt desperate to hear from God yet heard only silence.

Sometimes I tried to believe I had heard God's voice, but I knew I really hadn't. I wanted it so badly I pretended I had. "God, where are You?" I've often asked. "Are You listening to me? Do You know what's going on in my life? Do You care? Do I even know where You are?" In my 52 years as a Christian, I haven't yet known God in the same way I've known people I could see and touch and audibly hear. I know my wife, Rachael, in ways I don't know the Father, and I mean personal ways, not physical ones. I know Kep and Ken, my sons, in ways I don't know God's Son. And I know special friends like Trip, Jim, Evan, Glen, and Kent in ways I don't know God's Spirit. Yet the Spirit is inside me, nearer than human friends could ever be.

But all that's changing. Not completely, of course. Complete change comes when we get home. But enough change is going on to give me fresh hope that more is ahead in this life. Something good is happening inside me that's new, after all these years of being a Christian. Perhaps what encourages me most is that the new hope grows stronger on bad days, and I still have plenty of those. Knowing my real Papa is meaning more to me. I can now report that there are moments of encounter with God that are more real and reach deeper and produce more joy than my best encounters with others, including my wife, my kids, and my closest friends.

Emptiness, loneliness, thirst, and hunger still plague me, along with irritability, discouragement and boredom. I still have dark days. But now these experiences sometimes seem more like open doorways into a better world than thick walls trapping me in this one. Now when I ask God for things I want, I'm more aware that He's listening. And I feel less demanding, less as if I'm trying to control God, to get Him to do certain things that, rightly or wrongly, matter to me.

Every once in a while, I'm staggered by the thought that He's having a great time doing me good right now, no matter what's happening. He wants me to be as happy as He can make me. And I'm realizing for that to happen, I must give up on the happiness I can find elsewhere. That doesn't mean I'm not to enjoy a good meal or good friendship; it means I'm not to depend on or require the good things of life for my well-being, or to figure out how I can get God to give me the legitimate blessings of life that I want—or when I get them to ask them



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to fill me up more than they can. The best change is that now I'm hearing from God in a way I haven't before. Sometimes, though never audibly, I hear that Father speak more clearly than I hear the voice of a human friend. In an increasing number of situations—some seemingly trivial, like whether to get up when I wake up before the alarm goes off, and some of more obvious consequence, like what to say to my wife in an argument or what topic to select for a talk I'm scheduled to give the next morning—in situations like these, I sometimes know exactly what to do. I know as surely as I know it would be a good thing to remember my wedding anniversary. All these changes are directly the work of God. But He's working through a vehicle He's given me. That vehicle is a new understanding of prayer that, although still shallow and perhaps new only to me, is far deeper and richer—and simpler—than anything I've known before.

#### A NEW WAY OF PRAYING

I've practiced centering prayer. I've contemplatively prayed. I've prayed liturgically. I've interceded and petitioned. The first model of prayer I learned as a kid was ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. I tried that, too, for years. I've benefited from each, and I still do. In ways you'll see, elements of each style are still with me. There are many good ways to pray. But I believe I've sovereignly stumbled on a fresh way to think about prayer that has led me to a new way of praying. It's not a formula or technique. There are no

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techniques in good conversation with God. There are no means to manipulate Him, no ways to persuade Him to do things our way. He's not open to input on how best to run my life. What I want to share with you is rather a way to relate to God that lets us hear Him speak. It's not just a way to wait for Him or to listen to Him or to focus on Him. All those are included, but what I want to share with you is a way of coming to God that delights Him and changes us.

It's a way to pray that brings us into union with Him, so that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives through us. It's a way to know God so well that the deepest desire of His heart actually becomes the deepest desire of our, and that frees us to ask God for what we really want with confidence that He'll move heaven and earth to grant our requests, because what we want now matches what He wants.

## IT'S THE PAPA PRAYER, AND IT LOOKS LIKE THIS.

**PRESENT** yourself to God without pretence. Be a real person in the relationship. Tell Him whatever is going on inside you that you can identify.

**ATTEND** to how you're thinking of God. Again, no pretending. Ask yourself, "How am I experiencing God right now?" Is He a vending machine, a frowning father, a distant, cold force? Or is He your glorious strong but intimate Papa?

**PURGE** yourself of anything blocking your relationship with God. Put into words whatever makes you uncomfortable or embarrassed when you're real in your relationship with Him. How are you thinking more about yourself and your satisfaction than about anyone else, including God and His pleasure?

**APPROACH** God as the "first thing" in your life, as your most valuable treasure, the Person you most want to know. Admit that other people and things really do matter more to you right now, but you long to want God so much that every other good thing in your life becomes a "second-thing" desire.

Relational prayer provides the Spirit with a wide open opportunity to do what He loves most to do, to draw me into the heart and life of the Father and to make me more like the Son.

That's what I call the relational prayer. And I'm coming to see that it belongs in the exact center of my prayer life—for that matter, in the center of my entire spiritual journey. Nothing has relieved my confusion over unanswered prayer requests more than the realization that relational prayer must always come before petitionary prayer. Relate

and then request. Enjoy God and then enjoy His provisions, whatever they are. Power in petition of God depends on depth of relationship with God. The PAPA prayer is the best way I've discovered to develop and nourish the relationship with God given to me by Jesus through His life, death, and resurrection. Relational prayer provides the Spirit with a wide open opportunity to do what He loves most to do, to draw me into the heart and life of the Father and to make me more like the Son. Usually when I pray the PAPA prayer, nothing happens—at least nothing I can see or feel right away.

Sometimes I feel closer to God, or at least I think I do. And sometimes I sense an urge to do something, to reflect on a certain thought, to call a certain person, to think about a certain passage in the Bible, or to read a certain book. Most often, I feel and hear nothing. Praying the PAPA prayer is not rubbing a magic lantern and making known three requests to a docile genie that pops out before our eyes. It's simply a way to come to God and learn to wait, to listen with a little less wax in our spiritual ears, and, most of all, to be relentlessly real.

## RELATIONAL PRAYER LEADS TO PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Here's what I'm realizing: coming to God in this way creates space in me that the Spirit always fills. Always. I may not know it's happening, but it is. Like nature, the Spirit always fills a vacuum. But we're so busy filling our emptiness there's not much of a vacuum for Him to fill. That's why narcissists never meet God. They're too busy trying to fill themselves.

As I pray the PAPA prayer, over time I begin to see that my attitude is different. I see my sin more quickly and clearly than I see someone else's, even in an argument. I find myself relating differently with God and with others. I feel a little less of that damnable spirit of entitlement. I'm a little less whiny and demanding, a little less superior and condescending. And I realize that I'm a little less into myself, which lets me love better. I notice that I ask God for different kinds of things and with a different attitude.

I still plead for more energy, but without the same spirit of complaint; and I plead even more for a perspective on my fatigue that lets me know God is up to something good even when I stay tired, that He's always doing me good and enjoying Himself in the process. As I recognize the symptoms of advancing years and terrifying images of old age come to mind, I am developing a comforting sense that the best is yet to come, even if I end up alone in a nursing home with attendants taking care of me.

And God, my real Papa, is becoming more real. I can see that I'm on my way to wanting Him more than any other blessing I can imagine.

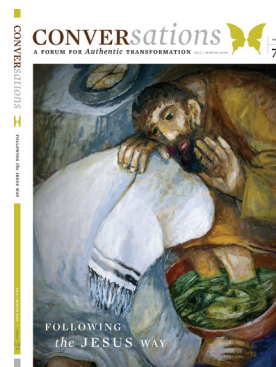
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And sometimes, not often, I hear His voice. I'm becoming part of the divine conversation. I'm becoming a participant in the divine nature. And that's union with God. Through the path opened by Jesus and by the power of the Spirit in God's Word, I'm coming to know my Papa. And that's forming the life of Jesus in me. I want to please God and reveal Him to others at any cost, more than I want any other blessing. And that's just like Jesus.

The PAPA prayer is simply a way to open dialogue with God, to relate with Him more intimately and honestly than I relate with anyone else. It helps me become more interested in listening than speaking, more eager to hear His voice than for Him to hear mine. It's a way of cleaning out my ears so I can become an attentive and discerning listener to God. It's also a way to make room in my soul that He loves to fill, to clean out the rubbish I pile into my inner world so that He can fill me with His reality. It helps me realize that to experience God, I must experience Him in the way I relate to others, that I must behave toward others with the divine energy and wisdom He's already put

in me. And it's a way of surrendering my tongue, that hardest of all beasts to tame (James 3:7-8). It brings together what I most want and what the Father most wants to give. It lets me ask for first things, for what really matters in life, with more eagerness than I ask for second things.

I'm coming to see that my health, my family's health, my marriage, my ministry, my bank account, even whether my children are walking with God, are all second things in comparison to the first thing of knowing God, or enjoying Him and trusting Him and serving Him and becoming more like Him. The PAPA prayer puts relating with God ahead of asking things from God. It stirs me to value knowing Him more than getting something from Him. And the better I get to know Him, the more I know I'm in for everything my heart could desire, because He loves to make me happy. When I put first things first, I become more confident that second things are on their way. With delight, I realize that God is running our relationship. It gives Him the first word in our conversation, and the last.



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