

Praying with Others about Challenges Relating to Race and Faith

Excerpts from
Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life
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Incarceration

The Rev. Dr. John C. Welch '02

There are three groups of people affected by incarceration we should think about when we pray: the currently incarcerated, the formerly incarcerated, and the families of both. The following information is helpful to keep in mind when praying with or for individuals in these groups.

One non-celebrative fact is that the United States has the highest prison population and the second highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. More than two million people are in prison in this country, and more than seven million are under correctional control, at an estimated cost to tax payers of \$80 billion per year. More money is spent on maintaining a prisoner than educating a child. Over the course of 30 years, the United States has been building the prison industrial complex as specifically linked to the “war on drugs.” According to research, however, drug use in this country was in decline when our government declared this war.

Moreover, this mass incarceration system disfavors people of color. Michelle Alexander notes in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, that there are more African-Americans in prison, on parole, or on probation than there were slaves in the earlier centuries of U.S. history. Further, juveniles comprise an often-overlooked population in our prisons. The United States is one of only a few countries that have incarcerated juveniles for life. Some of them are even on death row.

For prisoners who do not receive lifetime sentences, life after release is different. After their period of incarceration, many return to a world much different from the one they remembered existed prior to their imprisonment. In their “new” world, many are denied job opportunities, public housing, and in some jurisdictions the right to vote. Both during and after their incarceration, the effects of their imprisonment are not limited to the prisoners themselves—their families and communities are also affected.

As Christians, our faithfulness to the gospel requires us to become aware that U.S. laws were constructed in such a way as to disadvantage unfairly one group of people over another. These same laws are the source of the disproportionality in both sentencing and ethnic representation in our prisons.

When providing pastoral care to the incarcerated, the formerly incarcerated, and their families, it is important not to pass judgment. We see in [Genesis 39](#) that Joseph was wrongly imprisoned, and we read in [Jeremiah 37](#) that Jeremiah suffered the same injustice. We learn of the unjust imprisonment of John the Baptist in [Matthew 11](#), of Paul and Silas in [Acts 16](#), and of Paul’s final arrest and wrongful imprisonment beginning in [Acts 21](#). Excepting in the account of John the Baptist, we see explicitly in all

these examples that the one imprisoned made a positive impact on the others in the prison community—prisoners and prison workers alike.

[Matthew 25:36](#) reminds us of our obligation to visit those who are in prison. But the word for “visit” used in this passage—*episketomai*—carries with it the connotation of caring for, looking upon in order to benefit. It does not mean simply peeking in on. Whether a prisoner was justly found guilty or wrongfully accused and convicted, we are called upon to care for him or her. And in our offering of active care to the imprisoned, we ought to hope that such care becomes contagious among that population, beginning with the people we are caring for and spreading to their fellow prisoners.

Then, when an incarcerated individual is released, we need to extend our help further in the reunification process with his or her family and in the reintegration process into the community. Our active and prayerful support as the former prisoner adjusts to regained freedom can play an essential role in a good and positive outcome for all involved.

Consider using language such as that in the prayer below when praying with a current or former prisoner, his or her family, and your congregation, Bible study group, or circle of friends:

God of Heaven and earth and all that is therein, give us the compassion to care for those bound in our prison system. I ask that you help us to look beyond the crime just as you look beyond our faults. Help us to see in the person imprisoned someone created in your image and in your likeness, and help us to respond to his/her humanity. God, I pray for the ones who have been set free, having served their time, that their road to reintegration would be made smooth by an array of opportunities—opportunities that will allow them to have their dignity restored. For you, O Lord, saw enough in all of us, as ill-deserving as we were, to give your life on our behalf. I thank you for your love that allowed mercy to cover us and grace to keep us, even from ourselves. Amen.

Helpful resources on the topic of incarceration include the books *Just Mercy*, by Brian Stevenson (Random House, 2014), and *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander (The New Press, 2012).

Incarcerated persons might wish to consult <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/in-prison/ministry-basics/what-bible-says-about-prison-ministry/>.

Families of the incarcerated will find helpful materials at <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/support-friends-family-of-prisoners/coping-incarceration-loved-one/>.

On the topic of justice reform, see <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/justice-reform-resources/>.

Oppression

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Historically, one of the great strengths of African-American Christianity has been the conviction that God is proximate, accessible, and responsive—especially in times of urgent need. In the midst of the bruising oppression of slavery and other forms of systematized injustice and inequality, African-American Christians frequently embraced a conception of God as “refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” ([Psalm 46:1](#)). When doors were closed and avenues cut off, God was viewed as the one capable of “making a way out of no way.” When facing opposition and oppression, God was seen as the people’s “salvation” and source of courage, the one who “takes them up” when forsaken by all others, and the one who causes their enemies and foes to “stumble and fall” ([Psalm 27:1, 2, and 10](#)).

These understandings of God contributed to an African-American social and spiritual agency that encouraged social purposefulness and resourcefulness operating closely together with spiritual confidence and centeredness. Integrations of these social and spiritual postures achieved public expression in the preaching and prayers of African-American Christians—with those dimensions sometimes fueling and giving rise to collective public engagement and activism. More attention has been given to connections between preaching and public activism than to prayer and public activism, but in notable instances prayer has been a central ingredient (if not a precondition) in African-American activism.

Historian Dennis Dickerson draws attention, for example, to a widely supported “National Deliverance Day of Prayer” spearheaded early in the Civil Rights Movement by two prominent black clergy activists, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Archibald J. Carey Jr. (*African American Preachers and Politics*, 2010, p. 163). The emphasis on prayer in this instance intended a twofold purpose: “deliverance of [activists] in Montgomery and all Americans who are the victims of prejudice” and “salvation for all those whose souls are afflicted with the sin and disease of hatred.” An emphasis on prayer was discernible throughout the Civil Rights Movement, with protest marches and actions often being preceded by public prayer and worship services.

Although connections between prayer and social justice are certainly not confined to the African-American experience, what historical accounts of the role of prayer during the Civil Rights Movement reinforce is the importance of collective, targeted prayer. Similarly to Jesus’ followers, who with singularity of purpose gathered in prayer in the Upper Room following Jesus’ ascension ([Acts 1:14](#)), activists during the Civil Rights Movement often gathered in churches with a singularity of purpose. What was desired by those gathered in the Upper Room was God’s manifestation through the Holy Spirit’s presence and anointing. What was desired in countless church gatherings during the Civil Rights Movement was God’s manifestation through an empowerment of efforts to bring about an end to formalized racial segregation. In both instances, Christians engaging collectively in purposeful prayer received that for which they prayed in the form, one might say, of tongues of fire, hearts on fire, and anointed witness and action.

Engaging collectively in purposeful prayer (including about such matters as oppression and social justice) can position us where a key biblical principle related to prayer can be demonstrated. Jesus said to his disciples: “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:19). Followers of Jesus in an Upper Room appeared to have believed that.

Followers of Jesus in quite a few Civil Rights Movement prayer services appeared to have believed that. Hopefully, more of us today desiring manifestations of God's liberating power in our contexts and circumstances will take that principle to heart as well.

The prayer below expresses our petition and hope in God that oppression will not have the last word:

Oh God, in times of trouble, we have called upon you, and you have answered. When confronted by strong forces, you have empowered us by your Spirit. So in the face of that which oppresses, help us to stand fast in the assurance that we have come this far by faith, and by the knowledge that you have never left us nor forsaken us. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Persecution

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Writing to a minority church perched precariously between competing interests in the Roman Empire, James envisions a connection between testing and maturity: "we know that the testing of our faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:3-4). I was reminded of this text on a visit to Egypt, where brothers and sisters in Christ exuded resurrection hope while sharing stories of religious persecution and threats of violence. Living as religious minorities through two revolutions has a way of clarifying the nature of Christian identity and discipleship. I met countless Egyptian Christians who testified to the surprising power of the cross to equip and enable the church for non-violent, loving, and subversive responses to church bombings, social intimidation, and labyrinthine legal challenges to local churches. By the grace of God, their perseverance gives way to hope.

Prayer for the persecuted church is both a simple and confusing thing. We have a long tradition of celebrating the stoic faithfulness of famous Christian martyrs, while also minimizing the horrors of religious violence with triumphal rhetoric like "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" (Tertullian). On the one hand, this tradition makes perfect sense. The mystery of our faith begins with an awareness of such religious violence, for we remember every week at the communion table that Christ died. Remembering the martyrs and those who have faithfully borne up under persecution helps us attend to the cruciform, upside-down dimensions of our faith. Furthermore, we have inherited a tradition that has curated stories of the Christian faith's surviving, growing, and even thriving against difficult odds. On the other hand, however, our persecution stories lean into gratuitously heroic caricatures. They do for persecution what *The Passion of the Christ* does for the crucifixion. Action-hero motifs infect our historical imagination, such that the persecuted becomes a beaten and bloodied conqueror in the name of Christ. In such frameworks, we have little room for Jesus' own cry of dereliction or the stories of persecution that demoralized the church rather than demonstrated its persistent superiority—stories such as the Japanese persecution fictionalized in Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*.

The truth is that "the persecuted church" has never been a singular or simple construct. We often inflate stories of persecution in the early church (when Roman persecution was almost always regional and

sporadic) while ignoring the systemic brutality inflicted upon Christian groups in the modern era (today for example, the plight of Christian communities across the Middle East). Furthermore, it can be difficult to parse out the differences between ethnic and religious violence in contested regions of the globe. A Christian organization might claim religious persecution, whereas the U.S. State Department understands violence or exclusion as a recent manifestation of ethnic or cultural rivalry. What looks like persecution may be better understood as the consequence of failing political institutions and diminishing social trust.

So how do we pray *with* and *for* the persecuted church? The Scriptures provide for us at least three different modes of prayer with our persecuted brothers and sisters, and I think all three merit consideration and practice. First, Psalms of lament, such as [Psalms 89](#) and [94](#), help us wrestle with injustice in the world and teach us to tell the truth about both God and the world. God indeed rules the world, yet justice and righteousness seem like a distant promise. These psalms teach us to cry, “How long, O Lord?” They emerge from Israel’s own exilic experience, and they are prayers that we pray with those suffering persecution. Second, we pray with Jesus to “Our Father in heaven” for God’s kingdom to come, and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The “How long?” of the Psalms becomes concrete as we prayerfully imagine God’s Reign breaking into the violence of our world. To pray for God’s Reign to come in the broken places of our world, however, we need both a theological imagination and an informed opinion. Karl Barth famously encouraged Christians to read the Bible and the paper. Perhaps we should also pray through the paper for God’s Reign. Finally, the Apostle Paul teaches that we fulfill the law of Christ when we bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). Prayer for the persecuted church becomes most concrete when we pray in partnership with brothers and sisters around the world. Through the near-miraculous connectivity of social media, we can remain in contact with Christians we have met in our travels or through different church ministries. Let us not only keep these brothers and sisters in prayer—let us also remain connected to them and share in their hopes, prayers, and concerns.

Let all of us pray for the persecuted church around the world:

Heavenly Father, with our sisters and brothers suffering under oppression, violence, stress, and exclusion, we cry out, “How long, O Lord?” How long will corrupt government officials and so-called religious leaders use religious symbols and practices to enrich themselves at the expense of others? How long will failed political and economic institutions leave minority communities vulnerable to ridicule, physical harm, and religious persecution? How long will your people suffer?

Our Father, in whom we “live and move and have our being,” we confess that you are sovereign over all the earth, that while the “kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord,” you will not be moved. We pray, Lord, that your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We pray specifically today for (name a country or region or people to focus for prayer). We pray for your church in this place: may they be granted not only perseverance, but also hope. May their lives together bear witness to the hope found in the resurrected Jesus Christ.

Finally, Lord, we pray for (name people you know in this region). May you grant them what they need for today, as well as hope for tomorrow. Bind our hearts to them through your Spirit.

In the hope of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray,

Amen.

Prejudice

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At the heart of our Christian faith is the conviction that all people are made in the image of God—and so are created good. All people—of all races, ethnicities, languages, and nationalities; all gender identities and sexual orientations; all religions; all body types and hair colors; all abilities; all educational levels, incomes, and classes. All people are made in the good image and likeness of God.

And yet . . . how often we determine, sometimes unconsciously, that one group of people is better than another. How often we deem one person worse than another based on her accent, his income, her gender identity, the number of degrees he has, or the color of his or her skin.

Gracious creator God, stay with me today; awaken my consciousness so that I will see you in the face of everyone I meet.

Our prejudices—our feelings and attitudes about groups of people—are not based on reason or even on our own experience. They are *prejudgments* based at times on stereotypes or on the self-centered belief that the group I belong to is better in every way than any other. Prejudices never take into account the value of individual difference within groups. Sometimes, as we begin to recognize the fundamental sinfulness of prejudice and realize how deeply seated it is within us, how it reaches back to our childhood, we are tempted to deny it or try to explain it away by saying things like, “Well, that’s just the way I was raised.”

Gracious forgiving God, stay with me today; remind me that all people are made in your good image.

The Apostle Peter’s prejudice was so ingrained that he thought he shouldn’t associate with certain people—such as Cornelius, a Gentile. The conversion in Peter’s thinking began with a vision that startled and confused him. At noon one day in Joppa, as he was waiting for lunch to be prepared, he fell asleep and dreamed, as might be expected, about food. He saw a great sheet filled with all kinds of animals, including birds and reptiles, and heard a voice saying something along the lines of, “Here’s lunch; help yourself.” Peter responded, “No, I would never eat such things; they are unclean.” Then visitors arrived and invited him to travel with them to Caesarea to meet Cornelius. When they arrived, Peter began by saying that he should not even be talking with his hosts—but then, in a sign of his own conversion, he said: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Hear the echo of that statement in Romans 2:11, where Paul writes, “For God shows no partiality.”

In fact, the theme that all people are acceptable to God and that we should not show prejudice against anyone runs through all of Scripture—as seen most profoundly in the way that Jesus accepted everyone, especially those found unacceptable by others.

Gracious God of all, stay with me today; grant me the grace and courage to follow Jesus and follow his example of finding everyone acceptable.

For some of us, the prejudice of others means that we live in constant oppression and so find it difficult to remember that we, too, are made in the wonderful likeness of God.

Gracious creator God, stay with me today; restore in me the joy that comes from knowing that I am made in your image.

The following prayer, written by J. Philip Newell, speaks to me. I pray that it speaks renewal and restoration to you and to those with and for whom you pray for healing from prejudice, whether harbored or suffered.

In your light, Gracious God,
May we glimpse again your image deep within us
the threads of eternal glory
woven into the fabric of every man and woman.
Again may we catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
fashioned in your likeness
deeper than knowing
more enduring than time.
And in glimpsing these threads of light
Amidst the weakness and distortions of my life
Let me be recalled
To the strength and beauty deep in my soul.
Let us be recalled
To the strength and beauty of your image
in every living soul.

For this prayer and others by J. Philip Newell, see his daily prayer guide, titled *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer* (Eerdmans, 2000).