



Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life: Part III

This five-part prayer resource written by faculty, program directors, and leaders from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary community provides thoughtful essays on ways Christians can pray with people experiencing life's challenges.

Part III topics include:

- » Homelessness
- » Incarceration
- » Injustice
- » Job Loss
- » Oppression
- » Persecution
- » Prejudice



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Dear Reader of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life,”

As a seminary focused on preparing people for ministry in the way of Jesus, our hope at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is that “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” will help you think well for the work of helping bear the burdens of others. The present installment represents Part III of this resource.

The essays that are included aim at helping Christian leaders—especially newer leaders—navigate theologically complicated issues with the people to whom they minister. The articles address topics by answering questions such as:

1. What is helpful to say/pray in this regard? What is unhelpful to say/pray, and why?
2. How can one incorporate Scripture in a prayer without becoming “preachy”—and what scriptures might one use with respect to the particular circumstance faced?
3. Are there specific liturgies or prayers (individual or corporate) that might be used or consulted regarding the given difficulty?
4. What books of prayers (or books on the topic of prayer) might one consult?

These thoughtful essays do not give specific, “correct” answers on how all Christians should pray with people in such circumstances . . . readers from a variety of viewpoints will be likely to find contributions that speak to their own needs for effective ministry.

Throughout this resource you’ll find a number of hyperlinked biblical passages. We encourage you to read these selections and consider how God’s word might further shape your care for others dealing with life’s challenges.

The Scripture quotations contained in the essays are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Part III of “Praying with Others through the Challenges of Life” includes essays on the following topics:

- » **Homelessness**
The Rev. Karen Rohrer, Director of the Church Planting Initiative
- » **Incarceration**
The Rev. Dr. John C. Welch ’02, Vice President for Student Services and Community Engagement and Dean of Students
- » **Injustice**
The Rev. Dr. Brian Wells, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program
- » **Job Loss**
Dr. Helen Blier, Director of Continuing Education
- » **Oppression**
The Rev. Dr. R. Drew Smith, Professor of Urban Ministry
- » **Persecution**
Dr. Scott Hagley, Assistant Professor of Missiology
- » **Prejudice**
The Rev. Dr. David Esterline, President and Professor of Cross-cultural Theological Education

HOMELESSNESS

The Rev. Karen Rohrer, Director of the Church Planting Initiative

Caring for and walking with those whose needs we cannot fill is part of the call and regular work of the Christian and pastor. We confess a God who is with us despite and in the midst of suffering, so we cannot be afraid to name God's presence even when things are beyond our power to repair.

Homelessness—the systems that cause it, the stigma it carries, and the combination of societal and life events that allow it to happen—are typically beyond our capacity to solve in our role as friend or even pastor. This reality is not to discourage our effort or in any way to take less seriously the words in James 2, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (vv 15-17).

That said, these words, alongside our own tendency to live by shame rather than grace, have through time tempted Christians to fear and ignore people facing or experiencing homelessness—for we know, deep down somewhere, that a sister or a brother suffering in such a way is an indictment of the society we participate in and the comparative luxury in which we shelter ourselves.

Encountering those who are suffering for lack of material comforts is encountering our own privilege, and it is difficult. Not only that, but prayer in such a space is particularly difficult, because in prayer we are coming before the God of truth, and the truth is that we are not living in a just system.

The first question, then, is, “How can I pray in the midst of injustice?” or perhaps more accurately, “How can I pray honestly for my and our rescue from a culture of death, even as I, as a housed person, am on the winning side of that culture?” We can be tempted to think that praying about homelessness is about us praying for others; but our prayer must actually start with our own healing. And that prayer, more likely than not, starts with the silence of listening—for God and for the stories of those we journey alongside.

Many of us have never experienced the anxiety and trauma of being homeless or precariously housed. As with any difficult circumstance, the trauma of homelessness is layered. Socially, you (homeless persons) are viewed differently, avoided, ignored, and exiled from community life. Physically, you are vulnerable, not only to the elements but also to unhealthy food, unsanitary conditions, and the stealing from you of what little you have while you sleep. Emotionally, you are forced to contend with loss, hazards, and systems that are foreign to the majority of people who pass by you every day.

When working and praying with people in these vulnerable circumstances, know that they are the experts. Ask them what they would like to pray for. Take them seriously when they tell you. Listen to their stories and share stories of your own. Do not, as the victor in this culture of death, try to train or invite them to be more like you. Learn from them how to pray. After all, if we are praying the prayer Christ taught us to pray, it will be in the words of a man who had “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58).

The prayer below uses language that follows the guidance given here:

God who traveled in our behalf, be with your servant [name], who traveled in our behalf to join us here. Thank you for the love you have showed us in our time with [name], for we are always blessed when your beloved come to us. Holy Spirit, Hedge of Protection, Mother of Comfort, walk with [name], stand guard over her/him as she/he sleeps and bless her/his steps as she/he wakes to go where you call her/him. God, when hope is wearing thin, stand with her/him. Wherever she/he goes, stay with her/him, for we know that wherever she/he is, she/he will always be within the reach of your voice, your grace, and your love. And we pray that she/he might come back safely again to us when we meet again.

Further, loving God, we pray for our world and our culture. We ask that you would continue to knit us into relationship with one another—that we might bear each other's burdens, comfort each other's

sorrows, and celebrate each other's joys. Jesus, we know that we are more whole when we stand with each other. Strengthen us to do just that when seasons are hard. We trust that we are Yours. May we practice the unity of sisterhood and brotherhood together all our lives long—in this place and beyond it. Amen.

For helpful resources on the topic of homelessness, see:

- » *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, by Matthew Desmond (Broadway Books, 2017); and
- » *Nickle and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (Picador, 2011).

Online, see:

- » "Facts on Homelessness," <https://projecthome.org/about/facts-homelessness>.

INCARCERATION

The Rev. Dr. John C. Welch '02, Vice President for Student Services and Community Engagement and Dean of Students

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 the person imprisoned as 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:

- » *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/>.

INJUSTICE

The Rev. Dr. Brian Wells, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program

Martin Luther King Jr. frequently said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of injustices in the world. Injustice can be systemic, corporate, or personal. It affects individuals, groups, and nations.

Injustice is contrary to what God wills. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for justice in the words, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). Heaven is the reality in which God’s will is done with both haste and perfection. If this prayer is indeed the model for every disciple of Jesus, then an essential part of true prayer is a call for justice to be done on planet earth.

In spite of the fact that there is injustice in the world, God is just—and God requires justice as the prime duty of humanity. The Prophet Micah said, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8).

The Psalms model for us many prayers for justice. Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel categorized such psalms as prayers of orientation—and sometimes, new orientation. Whenever a person is experiencing a verbal impasse in prayer, either because of the enormity of the weight of injustice or insufficient vocabulary of expression, that person can find and pray the psalms which embody his or her pathos and pain as a result of injustice.

The call to prayer about injustice is also a call to action. One of the most powerful parables modeling the proper relationship between prayer and action is the story about the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow, found in [Luke 18:1-8](#). In the story, a widow has experienced an injustice and goes to a crooked judge to plead with him to rectify the situation. He refuses, because he himself is unjust. The widow, however, is persistent in her confrontation of the judge and will not take no for an answer. Finally, the judge caves in, but not for the right reason. He grants justice to the widow because he doesn’t want to be perpetually bothered by her. He does the right thing even though his motivation

is wrong. His heart isn’t changed, but his actions do change things for the better for the widow. On the importance of the difference between changes of heart and acts that make the world a little more just, hear again the words of Dr. King in a speech he gave at Western Michigan University:

While it may be true that morality cannot be legislated, behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me and I think that is pretty important.

(Martin Luther King Jr., “The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture,” December 1963)

The widow prayed for justice and got it from an unjust judge because she coupled persistence with her prayers for justice. Her prayer for justice gave her courage to confront, patience to endure, and strength to struggle. Prayer and action belong together.

Oftentimes in the parables, God is like some of the characters—the king, the sower, etc. But in this parable, God is not like the unjust judge, who must be confronted and bothered before he will reluctantly grant justice. In contrast, Luke says that God will quickly “grant justice to God’s chosen ones who cry to him day and night” (Luke 18:7-8).

On that basis, helpful language for praying with others that injustice will cease may be found in the following prayer:

God, may you quickly grant justice to those who consistently cry out to you. Make the high places low; make the low places high, and smooth out the rough places, so that all may stand on the common ground of equality—socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. In the name of Jesus, amen.

JOB LOSS

Dr. Helen Blier, Director of Continuing Education

What do you want to be when you grow up?" This question, posed to generations of children, almost invariably assumes one kind of answer—what kind of occupation do you want to have? In it, we are not asking about the ways of relating to others or practices or kinds of values that mark adulthood; rather, we expect an answer such as teacher, firefighter, doctor, or the like. I remember my son's pushing back against an essay he had been assigned to write in school; asked what he wanted to do as an adult, he was at a loss. I queried, "What do you want to do?" He replied, "All I want is to make a positive difference."

The connection between our occupations and our identity is deeply embedded in our pragmatic American culture. Who we are and what we do for a living don't quite make a perfectly overlapping Venn diagram, but it's close. Think about the prevailing rhetoric around education—it doesn't center on preparing thoughtful members of the civic community. It centers on preparing people for participation in the workplace. Bookstores and libraries have dozens of linear feet of shelf space dedicated to getting your dream job, following your passion, and taking charge of your professional life. And most religious communities explicitly affirm the importance of work that is adequately compensated, meaningful, and dignified.

But the reality is that we live in a time marked by a volatile economy, uncertainty about the future, and dramatic shifts in the marketplace. This changeable environment means that, for most people, work is less likely to be an exercise in self-actualization and more likely a means by which they can take care of themselves and their dependents and possibly have a sense of place in the world—and an increasingly unreliable means at that. When people lose their jobs (or can't seem to land a job in the first place), it is often for reasons that are out of their control. In short, there is a deep schism between popular and theological ideas about work and the day-to-day lived experience of it.

When doing pastoral care among people who have lost their jobs and perhaps experienced a crisis in vocation, it is important to address the complex set of feelings

and consequences of job loss. Being out of work can be devastating at many levels. Most obviously, there is a loss of income and a means to care for self and family. This pragmatic loss can be compounded by a personal sense of shame and loss of identity, worth, and place in the community. Some newly jobless people might even call into question their sense of God's faithfulness.

One of the most important things to do pastorally with people who have experienced job loss is to give them space to process the full range of strong emotions that are likely to be part of the experience. They need to be able to speak their truth. Simple maxims such as "God has a plan" or "God won't give you more than you can handle" can be received as patronizing and don't honor the real feelings of anxiety and anger that are likely present, along with the difficult circumstances their loved ones are experiencing as well. These easy one-liners can increase the sense of loss and frustration, thus causing a person to feel even more distant from a God whose plan involves suffering or whose intent is unclear. Instead, it is important to affirm the jobless where they are and to witness that God desires their flourishing.

It is also important to help nurture the resilience that will be crucial in their moving forward; regaining employment is itself hard work. The Psalms of lamentation—particularly [Psalm 77](#)—can help here; as the people of Israel felt abandoned by God, they gave full voice to their anger with God: "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; / in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying." And yet these psalms end with hymns of praise and wonder: "You led your people like a flock / by the hand of Moses and Aaron." What helped the psalmist make the shift? Remembering God's faithfulness and telling the stories of God's abiding presence through other trials.

Part of pastoral work with people struggling as a result of job loss, then, can involve praying these psalms. Doing so might take the form of an exercise such as "Dwelling in the Word," which asks the people praying to meditate on where they resonate with the experience of the Israelites and where they see God's presence and absence in their own lives. Invite

them to remember, as the psalmist does, stories of God's provision and, recalling their own gifts and talents, the parts of them that contribute to their communities. If hope and trust in God's faithfulness seem to be beyond their reach, then it can be the role of the pastoral caregiver to promise them to carry that hope and trust until they are able to do so themselves.

A similar exercise can be done with the call of Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12), whom God calls from the familiar and the comfortable and asks to pull up stakes and "go to a land I will show you." This story can help people as they confront the revisioning of their vocation to name their own feelings of fear and uncertainty in the midst of loss and to frame those feelings with a narrative of God's faithfulness even in the midst of the unknown.

You might close either exercise by praying with persons in this uncertain position—praying for provision and peace and for the capacity to see the next thing to which they are called. If they are part of your community of faith, it might even be helpful to pray with the sufferer that the community of believers be present to their fellow member's loss and material need. The following prayer, attributed to St. Francis de Sales in the late 16th century, may be helpful:

*Do not look forward in fear to the changes of life;
Rather look to them with full hope that as they arise,
God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely
through all things;
And when you cannot stand it, God will carry you
in His arms.
Do not fear what may happen tomorrow;
The same everlasting Father who cares for you today
will take care of you today and every day.
He will either shield you from suffering or will give you
unfailing strength to bear it.
Be at peace and put aside all anxious thoughts and
imaginings.*

OPPRESSION

The Rev. Dr. R. Drew Smith, Professor of Urban Ministry

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” (Ps 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” (Ps 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” (Matt 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 or forsaken us. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.

PERSECUTION

Dr. Scott Hagley, Assistant Professor of Missiology

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” (Jas 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, such as “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? Scripture provides 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 (Gal 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 on 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

The Rev. Dr. David Esterline, President and Professor of Cross-cultural Theological Education

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).

SAMPLE PRAYERS

HOMELESSNESS

God who traveled in our behalf, be with your servant [name], who traveled in our behalf to join us here. Thank you for the love you have showed us in our time with [name], for we are always blessed when your beloved come to us. Holy Spirit, Hedge of Protection, Mother of Comfort, walk with [name], stand guard over her/him as she/he sleeps and bless her/his steps as she/he wakes to go where you call her/him. God, when hope is wearing thin, stand with her/him. Wherever she/he goes, stay with her/him, for we know that wherever she/he is, she/he will always be within the reach of your voice, your grace, and your love. And we pray that she/he might come back safely again to us when we meet again.

Further, loving God, we pray for our world and our culture. We ask that you would continue to knit us into relationship with one another—that we might bear each other's burdens, comfort each other's sorrows, and celebrate each other's joys. Jesus, we know that we are more whole when we stand with each other. Strengthen us to do just that when seasons are hard. We trust that we are Yours. May we practice the unity of sisterhood and brotherhood together all our lives long—in this place and beyond it. Amen.

INCARCERATION

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 the person imprisoned as 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.

INJUSTICE

God, may you quickly grant justice to those who consistently cry out to you. Make the high places low; make the low places high, and smooth out the rough places, so that all may stand on the common ground of equality—socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. In the name of Jesus, amen.

JOB LOSS

Do not look forward in fear to the changes of life; Rather look to them with full hope that as they arise, God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely through all things;
And when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in His arms.
Do not fear what may happen tomorrow;
The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you today and every day.
He will either shield you from suffering or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.
Be at peace and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

(St. Francis de Sales)

OPPRESSION

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 or forsaken us. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

PERSECUTION

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 on 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

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.

(J. Philip Newell)

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