

Living between the Bible's first and last prayers

Most days I hover somewhere between Adam's "I was afraid" and John of Patmos's "Come, Lord Jesus."

by [Timothy Jones](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue



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Recently I realized I was eavesdropping on a prayer, the first in the Bible. I hadn't noticed I was witnessing humankind's earliest recorded reply to God.

It's Adam, knocked-kneed in his reticence, shrinking back in fear. "I heard the sound of you in the Garden," he says, answering God's searching question, "Where are

you?” The man and his wife cower “among the trees.” I can imagine him practically stuttering his answer: “I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

Hardly auspicious, this glimpse of conversation with God, uttered from the shadows. But certainly apt. Humankind’s first prayer rings full of pathos. *I was afraid, and I hid.* For years I overlooked its significance, didn’t grasp what it tells me about my own timidities and the world’s brokenness. Only now do I recognize the poignancy in this scene—and what it suggests about the drama to come.

In some eras, readers might be tempted to downplay the angst and estrangement on display in the Genesis account. But the rabbis, in their commentaries over the ages, commended Adam for his self-knowledge and honesty. His is not simply an over-tender conscience. He knows that communion has been disrupted. When the harmony of the garden shatters through his and Eve’s disobedience, they skulk away. Expelled from the garden, as the next stroke in the story falls, humankind fumbles for words amid shame and fear. Prayer now and for all time will contain an element of struggle.

The muddle and bewilderment caused by the rupture still affect our sense of what’s possible when we think of God—and especially when we talk with God. I identify with Adam some days, living with, if not exactly an inherited shame, at least a hesitancy in God’s presence. I can feel exposed among the jagged edges of a world that sometimes leaves us feeling not very loved. Living in a creation rife with strife and conflict, maimed and “subjected to futility,” as the apostle Paul says, I don’t cower, but I do find ways to hide. Or at least to stop short of an unreserved response to an invitation to freedom and communion.

No wonder our own conversing with God sometimes feels troubled, sporadic. Poet Christian Wiman writes movingly of his discomfort in relating to God, of how he prays mostly “in fugitive instants of apprehension, in both senses of that word.” That is, recognizing the presence but sensing an unsettledness, feeling both the drawing close and his own uneasiness.

We play our part in the distancing; for all our longing for closeness, we shrink from the dialogue that is possible. I may find refuge amid the comforts of consumerism to blank out the yearning. A living room couch gives us some cover; we can anesthetize our hurt there by wielding a remote. When I try actually to sit to pray, part of me hangs back, getting distracted and pulled into my phone’s news feed, the

longing mixed with defiance or reserve or uncertainty about the response to my asking.

There are those days (or nights) when human conversing with God can feel like, as George Buttrick put it decades ago, a “spasm of words lost in a cosmic indifference.” I understand better than I once did why there is in my spiritual practice a push and pull, my longing and defiance all in a jumble.

But there’s more, of course. Adam’s is not only a story of our hesitancy about praying but also a glimpse of the character of the one our prayers address. Indeed, when I do reach out, how often do I find God waiting for me to pray, to commune?

Already there are hints of such possibilities in the primeval story. “Where are you?” God asks the first couple—as if to say, with the ache of pathos, *Where have you gone? Why are you not here?* Medieval rabbi Rashi argued that God asks Adam where he is not because God doesn’t know but “in order to open up a conversation with him [so] that [Adam] should not become confused.” God asks questions in scripture not to get information, but to elicit response. God wants to stay in contact, even as judgment looms. Like a parent whose child has gone missing among the aisles of a grocery store or who wanders the streets haunted by addiction, God searches for what’s gone lost.

So the picture of what we can expect from prayer brightens considerably in light of God’s initiative. We have clarity to see it some days when, even while everything seems very far from what should be, we feel not just tentativeness but a beginning momentum of hope. This also helps us look ahead. Much of life seems lived in waiting: counting the days until everyone close to us can get vaccinated, longing for a child to be born, pleading for a loved one’s suffering to be relieved, wishing our regrets would go away.

Much of our praying takes place, then, amid a sense not only of incompleteness but of in-betweenness, between human moral frailty and some kind of restoration. I write this after a pandemic year of steady small losses and larger griefs, an extended low-grade trauma born of isolation and deferred hopes, lodged between the catastrophe and hoped-for safety.

So how do we pray when what was once fervency fails us or circumstances tarnish the gleam of our picture of God? As the biblical narrative unfolds, I see a hopeful conversational trajectory: not only does God expect a reply when talking to Adam,

but soon we see how God welcomes a cheekiness—surprising for an immense and sovereign deity.

Before long we see Abram driving a hard bargain with God, hardly holding back. Sarah and Hagar are not wilting petunias either. More glimpses come of the patriarchs and matriarchs speaking to God “face-to-face,” as it will be said of Moses. The prophets will fling at God a “How long?” on more than one occasion.

And the Psalms! They inhabit roughly the midpoint of the canonical Christian Bible, but they also represent an epic catalog of what’s possible in our back-and-forth interaction with God. No wonder I run to them most when I grieve or worry—letting the ebb and flow of lament and elation, petition and thanksgiving, estrangement and assurance keep me afloat above the swirling discouragement. I see what can be brought to God out of the gamut of human experience, even the indignation and complaint that rise within me. Jesus quotes their verses in their shining power and harrowing depths. I see here more of who the God is that my prayers reach for—a divine eagerness, even.

And in Jesus himself we see the brokenness of Adam and Eve and the curse of the garden in great part become undone. He keeps talking of a kingdom that is not only continuous with God’s work in and through Israel but also something new. Here and now but not yet, not completely. And he addresses God *Abba*, a term of intimacy.

As his earthly life unfolds, we see this is no mere sunny optimism. Julian of Norwich is well known for her line “All shall be well . . . all manner of things shall be well”; it’s been memed and posterized and overexposed. But lately I’ve grown fascinated by the larger context of these hopeful words: the 14th-century anchoress’s vision of the suffering Jesus, the graphic, gritty Jesus crucified. Her vision and “showings” make me think of Jürgen Moltmann’s comment that talk of God now takes place within earshot of the dying Jesus. And why not our talking *to* God as well? Julian, living in her own time of plague and social upheaval, kept before her eyes the jarringly hopeful picture of what James Cone called the “paradox of a crucified savior [that] lies at the heart of the Christian story.”

Because of that realism, in the kingdom Jesus announced and embodied, what is possible for our praying gets stretched and rounded out. We are told, at Jesus’ behest and in bold imperatives, to ask, even plead. We are taught to pray “your kingdom come.” This is prayer set against the knowledge that “that the whole

creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.”

Which helps on mornings when I catch the news and my prayers are as much quiet sighs as articulate disquisitions. When I get impatient for God to show up in some everyday strife or in our polarized national life or in the face of racial inequity.

For there are the visions like this in Ephesians 1, God’s “plan for the fullness of time in Christ,” which is about way more than our own individual spiritual connection. We get reminders of the world that God has destined to be on the way, still. Of how the church and its faith are, as Rowan Williams once put it in a lecture, part of the world’s secret, part of the mystery working its way into the outcome of what we will do as God’s people.

Any storyteller knows the value of not only a compelling beginning and developed middle but also a stirring ending. By the time we get to Revelation, we are well primed for something more: the culmination of prayers from creation’s big in-between. “With the [sacrificed] Lamb at the center” of Revelation’s closing scenes, as Miroslav Volf paints it, “the distance between the ‘throne’ and the ‘subjects’ has collapsed in the embrace of the triune God.”

Humankind’s stuttering start becomes transfigured to something more full-throated in the last chapter of this last book. For in the imagery of Revelation, so often seen as mysterious and off-putting, God’s invitation for dialogue with the descendants of Adam intensifies. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come,’” John the Revelator hears. “And let everyone who is thirsty come.” This invitation expands our praying amid our weary trying, our sometimes tepid hopefulness. It leads John to the Bible’s last recorded prayer. In response to the risen Christ declaring, “Surely I am coming soon,” John says, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” Now there is no hanging back wondering.

Come! Here I see an ecstatic longing for God, and once-gentle prayer turned into an imperative, an expectation that there is a universe more on the way. *Come, Lord Jesus!*—asking now out in the wide open, crying out for the full disclosure, meeting what is stubbornly tragic with a prayerful protest of expectation.

Sometimes I get stuck in the middle, between the Bible’s two bookended prayers. I’m better off than Adam but not quite where John the Revelator is, fresh from his vision of the resurrected Jesus. I’ll repeat Eastern Orthodoxy’s prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” It helps with my struggles and anxieties and

failings. But lately I've wondered what it might mean if my own prayers moved even more to the exuberance of the Revelator's, "Come!"

For the ending note of the Bible, its last prayer, spreads out beyond personally enriching spirituality: *Come*, I pray, not just to warm my soul but also for the whole of the cosmos. A world where refugees and migrant families flee violence and suffer as they wander and wait. Where people tremor because of their social standing or racial identity. Where the loss of a loved one to cancer or COVID leaves a chasm of loneliness. Where some live in the shadows because God's grace in Christ seems too good to believe. My prayers should turn me back outward to seek help for the world's great needs, the undone good, the poverty and alienation and brutality.

Come. I get glimmers here of how I can ask for a restoration of what has been forfeited or lost or wounded. To keep up my fervent (or wearied) asking that what is incomplete will become finally restored and well and whole. *Come, Lord Jesus*. I can pray only amid my soul's smallness and self-distancing from God, but I pray these words anyway, and I'm drawn close so that the halting fades from memory and God's dream for our world buoys up my words.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "From beginning to end."