

# Inhabited by Grace

THE WAY OF  
INCARNATE LOVE

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FOREWORD BY PRINCE G. SINGH



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## PART 1

### Spoken into Being

*"When you pray . . ."*

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:7-18

## CHAPTER 1

# Surprised by Prayer

Like is known only by like. Only he who abides in love can recognize love, and in the same way his love is to be known.

Søren Kierkegaard

Our children were all going trick-or-treating together for Halloween, so Amanda and I invited everyone over to our house for a quick dinner before going out. Everyone was dressed in their costumes, and as it so often happens around holiday festivities the children were excited and the parents were tired and cranky. To make things simple, we ordered pizza and had it delivered. After the pizza arrived we got our children settled at the table and invited everyone to join us in prayer.

Praying can seem awkward when you're around friends who may or may not go to church or may or may not want anything to do with God, but in our house when you eat you pray. It has always been our custom to do so regardless of the gathering or wherever we find ourselves. If I know that our guests are predominantly nonreligious I usually say something to the effect of, "You're in the priest's home, so we're going to pray before we eat. I don't want any of you to choke." So I offered a brief prayer, mindful that children had pizza in front of their faces and knowing that God is quick to listen, and as soon as we said, "Amen," one of

the young boys, whose family happened to attend another Episcopal church down the road, blurted out, “Well that’s the first time we’ve done that in about two years!” His mother, who was standing next to me, the priest, turned about three shades of red while the rest of us, including the father, attempted to restrain our laughter, though with little success.

It was quite a moment, as you can imagine. But it was understandable, because in most situations, especially as children, the reactions we have reflect our habits of life—or the habits of our parents, in this case. Our lives are a sort of mirror that reveals to others who we really are by the image we reflect through our speech and action, especially when we shout it loudly for all to hear. The child’s reaction to praying before a meal revealed that for him prayer is out of the ordinary, which means that, whether or not his family prays over meals at Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter, it’s not enough for it to feel normal.

It’s not enough for prayer to happen every once in a while. It’s not enough for us to pray on occasion. As Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians, we are to “pray without ceasing.”<sup>1</sup> We are to be in constant conversation with God, so much so that it should strike us as awkward when we don’t pray over a meal, before bed, when we wake up, throughout the day, for our friends, neighbors, and enemies. When our knee-jerk reaction to prayer is surprise, we have a problem. In every encounter, in every setting, we should rather be surprised if these do not begin with some petition or thanksgiving.

When our son was born, Amanda and I began praying the Lord’s Prayer each night before bed. We wanted to make sure our children grew up in a house of prayer and would always know that prayer is normal and bookends our days. We’ve never neglected this habit. On the few occasions that Amanda and I have been exhausted, or in haste to get our children to bed, and we forgot to pray, our kids reminded us. Our son and daughter are now teenagers, and we’ve begun staying up later than we once did. However, our son is an old soul, and his bedtime

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1. 1 Thess. 5:17.

comes earlier than for the rest of us. So nearly every night, he gets his shower, wanders downstairs, and interrupts whatever we're doing and says, "Can we pray?"

Amanda and I do not claim to be great parents. I'm pretty sure I've seriously damaged my children with my overuse of sarcasm. Nevertheless, we know that we've done at least one thing right, and that is praying daily with our children. I was a pretty good kid growing up, but I never once said to my parents before going to bed, "Can we pray?" My sixteen-year-old son reminds us to pray at night, not because Amanda and I have done something right; rather, this is what praying the Lord's Prayer for sixteen years has done to him. Praying the Lord's Prayer in our home has had an interesting effect on our life together as a family. It's surprising in our home not when we pray but when we fail to pray. This is how it should be—we should be shocked when prayer doesn't happen.

## CHAPTER 2

# Mirror, Mirror

Knowledge of God is not a subject's conceptual grasp of an object, it is a sharing what God is—more boldly, you might say, sharing God's "experience."

Rowan Williams

The way of prayer is a life continually disciplined by words that are not our own, for the benefit of people who are not "me," always and only to the praise of Christ's glory.<sup>2</sup> In her children's book *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*, author Ysaye M. Barnwell tells the story of a little girl growing up in the home of her grandmother. The story is set to music and wonderfully illustrated, and we learn of a young woman growing up in what appears to be poverty but never once feeling impoverished, because there were no mirrors in her Nana's house "and the beauty of everything was in her eyes."<sup>3</sup>

I never knew that my skin was too black. / I never knew that my nose was too flat. / I never knew that my clothes didn't fit. / I never

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2. Eph. 1:12.

3. Ysaye M. Barnwell, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998).

knew there were things that I'd missed, / cause the beauty in every-  
thing was in her eyes.<sup>4</sup>

The little girl never sees herself except as one seen by her grand-  
mother. To her grandmother she is perfectly black; she has a perfect  
nose; her clothes fit just right; and everything needful is in abundance.

The world outside was a magical place. / I only knew love. / I never  
knew hate, / and the beauty in everything was in her eyes.<sup>5</sup>

The gaze of her grandmother, whose invitation to see was, “Chil’ look  
deep into my eyes . . . ,”<sup>6</sup> is the lens through which the young girl sees  
everything, even herself. It is the vision of one who knows only as they  
are known.

This is the vision that Paul writes about in his first letter to the  
Corinthians. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see  
face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I  
have been fully known.”<sup>7</sup> Paul is referring here to the wisdom available  
to us as humans, which is the philosopher’s charge to “know yourself.”  
As the early fathers of the church taught, we *can* know God, but only  
through God’s energies—only through the numerous ways God is made  
manifest in creation. We know God supremely through the revelation of  
Christ, but this knowledge is limited by our proximity to Christ.<sup>8</sup> Even  
then we will never grasp the *essence* of God; we can only hope to know  
God through God’s activities and the revelation of Christ. What we are  
most capable of knowing, however, is our creatureliness—our nature as  
creatures intimately related to a Creator-God. When we truly know our-  
selves we come to know God in part. This is what Paul is suggesting,  
which is why he likens it to seeing through a mirror darkly.

All of us have looked into a mirror. Few of us may have seen an  
ancient mirror, a mirror like the one Paul would have seen or used. In

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. 1 Cor. 13:12.

8. Eph. 2.

first-century Palestine, the only mirrors available would have been ones hammered out in metal. There were no glass mirrors at the time. They saw an image reflected to them through the metal, including any number of blemishes. Even looking into a pool of water may have been clearer. Like the young girl in the storybook, people living in antiquity would have relied on friends and family to tell them whether they were beautiful or ugly, or whether they had something stuck in their teeth. They saw as they were seen. Even when glass was eventually used to make mirrors there remained blemishes and bubbles that prevented the viewer from seeing his or her image clearly.

There is a seismic shift, however, in the fourteenth century. Venetian glassmakers perfected a technique that, while initially involving a bevel in the glass, eliminated the blemishes and bubbles from mirrors.<sup>9</sup> At first these were small handheld mirrors; however, as the technology improved the size increased. Finally a person could look into a mirror and see their image perfectly reflected. No longer do we see with Paul in a mirror darkly; we now see clearly the image in which we are created—the image of God.

It should come as no surprise that this is when self-portraits came to dominate the world of art. Even many, if not most, of the paintings created during the Renaissance describe a variety of biblical narratives using the face of the artist's patron as the face of a saint or angel. One thinks of the Medici family in this regard. A person's attention is more and more on their own face and with whom their face is associated. There is a marvelous example in the Sistine Chapel where Michelangelo uses the face of a cardinal as the head of a demon. Cardinal Biago was tattling to the pope about the excessive nudity displayed in Michelangelo's painting, so he painted the prude cardinal's face on the naked demon, Minos, who watches over the gates of hell. (One should never tattle on a capable painter.)

Needless to say, the natural result of the clear, stainless mirror, which made it possible for humans to see their image perfectly reflected, led to

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9. For a history of the mirror and how it developed over time, see Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

a heightened emphasis on the self. Humanism and the mirror go hand in hand. Just try looking into a mirror and not thinking about yourself, your appearance, how beautiful or handsome you are, or about the blemishes on your face, perhaps the flatness of your nose, or that you have too much or too little pigmentation. It's unavoidable. Except, perhaps, if we get rid of all the mirrors.

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great Cappadocian fathers of the church who paved the way for our firm belief in the Trinity, has an alternative vision of what a mirror is. Gregory describes *us*, namely our souls, as mirrors. Just as a mirror takes on the image of whatever is placed in front of it, says Gregory, so we take on the image we place before ourselves. "If you put gold in front of a mirror," he writes, "the mirror takes on the appearance of the gold and because of the reflection it shines with the same gleam as the real substance."<sup>10</sup> Gregory goes on to say that "if it catches the reflection of something loathsome, it imitates this ugliness by means of a likeness, as for example a toad, a millipede, or anything else that is disgusting to look at."<sup>11</sup>

I may not look like a toad or a millipede if I stand in front of them, though I suppose I might by association, but I have noticed this mirror effect of other things, even certain dramas, on my disposition. The Netflix series *House of Cards* is one example. As the series progressed it became darker and darker. With each episode I noticed my posture shifting. I found myself at the end of each episode a little more slumped over than when I first turned it on. It's a well-produced show, which is why I kept watching. Increasingly, however, I found myself wearing the violence of the characters. I grew sadder and sadder as the characters chose courses of action that mingled their lives with hate. (Amanda stopped watching the show altogether; she's holier than I am.) But I became intrigued by the effect it was having on me. This is what Gregory is suggesting in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Whatever we place ourselves in front of will come to inhabit us as a disposition. If I put before myself things that elicit hate and violence, I will slowly take on hate and violence as a disposition.

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10. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Sermon II.

11. *Ibid.*

To clarify, this may or may not mean that I become violent or hateful. There are mixed results from studies done on those who, for instance, play violent video games or watch violent movies. Most studies seem to suggest that doing so does *not* make a person more violent. What they do show, however, is that these persons often become apathetic to violence. In other words, I may not become actively violent or hateful, but I may become passively violent and hateful, ignoring the suffering of others or simply ignoring others altogether. As a mirror, I take on the sensibilities of that to which I am most attentive. I become a spectator to violence, a spectator to the suffering of others. We take on the disposition of the people, places, and things that know us, whatever it is we place in front of us—whatever we place ourselves in front of.

We are all known by particular people, places, and things. We don't generally think in these terms, or at least not about these being bearers of self-knowledge. We think of ourselves as autonomous, self-knowing, even self-aware in our autonomy. The only problem with this notion is that none of us live in a vacuum. We were not dropped here from the sky. We all came from somewhere; we all have histories, families, and hopefully friends, all of which inform who we are. The difficulty is that objects like mirrors deceive us into believing that we are the fairest of them all. They turn us inward in negative ways that make us think we are individuals separable from others. We come to believe that we can write our own stories and choose our own histories. We choose our destinies instead of receiving ourselves as destined from God.

So how do we remedy this? How do we come to recognize that our lives are not our own,<sup>12</sup> that we did not choose God but God in Christ chose us?<sup>13</sup> If Paul and Gregory are right, and if the wisdom of a child really is the way,<sup>14</sup> then it begins by placing before the mirror of our souls people, places, and things that draw out from us the truth of our nature hidden in Christ. It begins by removing from our lives anything that turns us back on ourselves as woefully independent.

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12. 1 Cor. 6:19.

13. John 15:16.

14. Isa. 11.

We take on the *likeness*, says Gregory, of whatever we place before the mirror of our souls. Early theologians use this word *likeness* to refer to our thoughts, words, and deeds. We are created in the *image* of God, they tell us, but *likeness* to Christ in what we think, say, and do is how we become aware of our true nature as *imago Dei*—the image of God. God creates us in his image and for his purposes but God does not force the way of love upon us. It is always and forever a gift we are to receive with humility. The way we receive this gift is through what Maximus Confessor calls *volitive participation*.

*Volitive participation* is not to be mistaken for voluntarism. Voluntary association as an individual decision is one of the great sins of the modern church. *Volitive* is best understood as a *willful willing*—what is not *my* will. Volunteering is often associated with my decision to do something I do not have to do, as in spending the afternoon volunteering at the soup kitchen. Volitive participation, on the other hand, sounds like this: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”<sup>15</sup> Volitive participation is a prayerful disposition that names our frailty and inability to inhabit the will of God and yet give ourselves to being inhabited by the will of the Father. We say, “I will, *with God’s help*,” in our Baptismal Covenant. I do not choose to follow Jesus; I embrace my chosen-ness and relinquish my own will, which may involve helping at the soup kitchen. The difference between the two is that a volunteer is someone who acts for a temporary period of time for a purpose that may or may not be of self-interest.

A *volitive participant*, however, is one whose very life is assimilated to the form of Christ, always acting according to the will of the Father, and for the benefit of others. Volitive participation sounds like, “Our Father . . . thy will be done. . . .”

So what does volitive participation look like? In other words, what is this way of soulful mirroring?

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15. Luke 22:42.