

Delia Smith

A JOURNEY INTO GOD



PREFACE

Prayer is something that God does. If only we could grasp this simple truth. The trouble is that this something that God does is essentially mystery: there are no neat formulas, no amount of books on prayer can ever reveal just what it is that God does.

First and foremost prayer is a relationship in which God is the initiator, constantly seeking to elicit a human response. It is an ongoing relationship, and like any other it can't be programmed or labelled and packaged – 'this is prayer, fullstop!' Prayer is life: living, growing, developing, but always in secret – like a tiny seed buried in the earth steadily yet imperceptibly thrusting itself upward to the light.

What is it that impels this seed upward? We know the earth and the rain sustain its growth, but what awakens it to life? That is mystery, something that God does. Prayer is precisely like that: something mysterious within that gently pushes *us* towards that albeit unidentified light, which will ultimately bring us to the blossoming of our full potential and answer all our deepest longings.

This book does not attempt to unravel the mystery, nor offer any techniques or formulas. But hopefully it will encourage others to yield themselves to this deepest and hidden aspect of human growth and life.

Anne Elliot, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, admits she is quite eloquent when giving advice to others on a subject that in her own life 'could ill bear examination'. I can identify completely with her, and am anxious to point out that what is contained in these pages is offered by one who shares the struggle, who is still journeying and not one who has in any sense arrived anywhere.

The journey into God is one in which the whole human

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family is involved and (I believe) the response of each individual is inextricably bound up with everyone else's as a shared experience. What I, most of all, want to share with others is my own great hope in God, that he is indeed Lord, creator and lover of all that is, and that however murky our journey we will all eventually arrive at the point where we finally and fully recognise this truth: 'God saw all he had made and indeed it was very good.' As a human race we may not yet fully believe in God, but from the beginning God has always totally believed in us. That is my conviction, echoing the English mystic Julian of Norwich, who perceived that ultimately 'all shall be well'.

In order to encourage people to reflect more deeply and slowly, I have divided my thoughts into short sections which can be used on a daily basis, or from time to time whichever suits (it is also no accident that each chapter corresponds to a week). If a person is genuinely seeking God, God will undoubtedly meet them where they are and in whatever way they are best able to receive him. All I have set out to do here is provide a starting point, a springboard in which my own convictions and experiences are offered and shared.

Delia Smith
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GOD AS LOVER

*Set me as a seal on your heart,
Like a seal on your arm.
For love is strong as death,
Passionate love as relentless as death.
The flash of it is a flash of fire
A flame of God himself.
Love no flood can quench, nor torrent drown.*

SONG OF SONGS 8: 6–7

Perhaps the totality of God's love for his creatures finds its pivotal expression in what we understand as passionate love, that of a lover for the beloved – and this is how it is depicted in both the Book of Hosea and in the Song of Songs. Beyond that, in both the Judaic and Christian traditions, the loving union of man and woman has constantly been presented as a symbol of the desired union between God and humanity. All of human life is a movement towards this union, which is the sole purpose of our existence.

In Hosea the scenario goes something like this: God compares his creatures to an unfaithful wife – worse, to a prostitute – who takes many lovers, seeking through them to provide for herself without her husband's help. The husband's anger blazes at such infidelity, but such is his love he cannot bring himself to give her up. He has the power to cut her off from her lovers, make her life barren, but the bitterness of that is not a punishment; it is the means of coaxing her back to her husband, the only one who will be a true and faithful lover to her.

In this simple story we can trace the unfolding of the love story between God and his people. Individually and collectively we too try to fulfil our deepest longings by our own efforts, flitting from lover to lover, seeking satisfaction in relationships, money, possessions, achievements, power. Yet for everyone time begins to run out: we find age creeping on, there are no more horizons and all that promise of fulfilment seems to be slipping away. But that emptiness and disillusion are the very things that can point us back towards the only source of fulfilment. 'She will chase after her lovers but not catch them, and then she will say "I will go back to my first husband . . ."' She never realised that I was the one' (Hosea 2: 9).

God's total love supersedes death because it is eternal. Occasionally we can be permitted an insight into this truth: I remember standing by a graveside on a bitterly cold February day, my arm linked with an old man whose wife had suddenly been taken from him after a short illness. As the coffin was lowered he clung to me so tightly that I myself somehow experienced in that grief the power of his love for her, and understood that that grave and that coffin were only peripheral to it.

Even in its fullest sense the love of man and woman can only be a faint shadow of God's love for each and all his creatures, a love of such passionate intensity that death is no barrier. The depiction of God in the Scriptures as our lover has become a central theme of the spiritual journey for successive generations ever since (which is why the Song of Songs – essentially an allegory of courtship between two lovers – has been included in the canon of Scripture). The culmination of courtship is union, two beings becoming one flesh – not just physically, but bonded by love and commitment.

Great spiritual writers like St John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila have described the destination of the spiritual journey as 'spiritual marriage', a state where God takes full possession of a person. These are lofty notions and not easily comprehended, but in a letter written to St Thérèse of Lisieux by her sister there is a genuine perception of it. Responding to a

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description by Thérèse outlining her own spirituality (which she calls her 'little way') her sister Marie writes: 'Oh, I was very close to weeping as I read the lines that were not of this earth, but an echo from the heart of God. May I tell you? I will: you are *possessed* by God, literally possessed.'

St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians describes it as being 'filled with the utter fullness of God' (Ephesians 3: 19). My own interpretation is that full union with God is being filled with the fullness of love, where the self-centred ego has disappeared because love has replaced it.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament with its history of humans as they really are – sinful, blind, obstinate, hard of heart – there shine stars, 'friends of God', who in some measure attained or were granted intimacy with the awful mystery. Such intimacy is still possible. Amidst a perverse and corrupt people 'Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him' (Genesis 5: 24). Here, it is suggested, was someone for whom God meant so much that he was swallowed up by him. Enoch disappeared, only God shone out. In this pregnant phrase of scripture we have a summing up of holiness, of the perfection of human life.

RUTH BURROWS: *Our Father*

LIFE, A JOURNEY INTO JOY

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city and the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne: 'You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.'

REVELATION 21: 1-4

When Jesus promised us the gift of his spirit, he also promised the gift of his risen life. 'I will not leave you orphans, I will come back to you,' he promised. 'In a short while the world will no longer see me but you will see me, because I live and you will live' (John 14: 18-19). What the incarnation invites us to participate in is resurrection *life*, to be men and women of hope, to celebrate life – being alive. Jesus came, he tells us, that we might have life to the full: his own imagery of heaven is that of the banquet. When the world – like the prodigal son – returns to the Father's house there will be one hell of a celebration (or rather one heaven of a celebration!) because the prodigal will have returned to life (Luke 15: 24).

There is a danger that Christianity can become exclusively Crosstianity, where suffering and deprivation become ends in themselves. The fight against poverty or famine of course must

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go on unremittingly and the sharing of resources must be a priority, but precisely because we want everyone to be equally rich, not equally poor. The good things of life are just as much a part of God's creation, ultimately to be enjoyed by everyone.

Hope is the key to joy, and participation in resurrection life means believing, hoping and bearing all things. I believe in God's unconditional love for me in spite of my weaknesses and failures, because Jesus has revealed this. I hope in a future where God's reign *will* be established on earth, and I bear with the suffering that has to be endured but with my eyes fixed firmly on the future when pain and suffering will cease.

The alternative is to live locked in a protective shell which will shield me from pain – but which will equally shield me from real joy too. Those who cling to sorrow with no expectancy of moving beyond the present situation are only accepting half-life. I have a friend who is a marvellous example of someone who utterly refuses to cling to suffering. A rare disease effectively and suddenly deprived him of his sight, which could have meant total disaster if he'd *allowed* it to ruin his life. Instead, a younger man whom he had trained in his own skills became a partner, and together my friend's long experience and the other man's sight continued a creative career.

That is what resurrection LIFE is about: not being immune to pain, injustice, betrayals, helplessness, but not letting them dominate. Joy and celebration are as integral to human life as suffering and dying, and if we need only one good reason to embark on the journey of prayer, it is to enable God to teach us the way to be authentically happy.

I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts . . . I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ and is from God and based on faith . . . All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come; I am racing for the finish for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus . . . If there is some point on which you see things differently, God will

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*make it clear to you; meanwhile let us go forward on
the road that has brought us to where we are.*

PHILIPPIANS 3: 9, 13–15, 16

GOD AT WORK

My Father goes on working, and so do I.

JOHN 5: 17

Not the easiest thing to come to terms with about prayer is that it is (in the words of St Paul which entitle this chapter) 'all God's work'. On the one hand this should be a tremendous relief to us; on the other hand we have this perennial problem of wanting to achieve rather than receive. While there is still a widespread belief that there is some knack to prayer, some secret method that brings results, it is always going to be difficult to grasp that our role in prayer is profoundly passive.

'But when you pray' Jesus said, 'go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place' (Matthew 6: 6). That secret place, where God 'works' within me, is not just secret from the world, it is also in a sense secret from me. It is the deep centre of my being, where God's activity is beyond my conscious perception. Ah! you may say, but Jesus promised that whoever follows him will *not* walk in darkness but have the light of life for his guide. Is that not a contradiction?

No, prayer *is* darkness to me (or what St John of the Cross calls 'night to my senses'). The hallmark of my prayer is not what does or does not happen in my prayer-time: the question of experience or non-experience is simply not relevant. The evidence will become apparent in the events of daily life. The light of life is perceived in the fruits of prayer, in spiritual growth.

This is not to suggest that my life is going to grow instantly in perfection. I am not going to grow immune to the turmoil, conflicts or disappointments of the world. I am not going to shrug off the imperfections of my own nature through prayer. But there *can* be peace within turmoil, love beneath the conflicts, and joy in spite of the disappointments. It is a gradually changing perspective, rather than a personality transplant.

What we have begun to do is what St Paul says and that is to 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2: 16). What prayer should be doing is shifting me in my values, instilling a wisdom I could never acquire for myself. Ultimately this process will become realised in my life, but not through trying to analyse what happens to me 'in secret', rather by surrendering to God at work (so much easier, for a start!). God always fulfils his work in those who allow him to do so.

*What is born of the flesh is flesh;
what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
Do not be surprised when I say:
You must be born from above.
The wind blows wherever it pleases;
you hear its sound,
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is
going.
That is how it is with all those who are born of the
Spirit.*

JOHN 3: 6-8

THE SIMPLICITY OF PRAYER

The simplicity of prayer, its sheer terrifying uncomplicatedness, seems to be the last thing most of us either know or want to know. It is not difficult to intellectualise about prayer – like love, beauty, motherhood, it quickly sets our eloquence aflow. It is not difficult but it is perfectly futile.

SISTER WENDY BECKETT

For me this is one of the wisest counsels on prayer I have come across, in itself a penetratingly simple insight into the journey of prayer which can help travel light years along the way. But there is one curious word in it that seems to jump up out of the page. Why should simplicity be terrifying? I think people find the idea terrifying because when faced with the awesome concept of communicating with God the creator of life they believe it *ought* to be complicated. Heaven knows, it can be almost impossible to get to see the chairman of a large company, but God!

The understandable reaction is to put space between us and God and fill it with comforting ritual, or to systematise prayer by cataloguing it into different degrees of meditation and purification, into prayers of this state or that stage. The strange thing is that there's not a word about any of it in the Gospels, only one simple guideline marked for our special attention: love God, love others and love yourself. But if we have insulated ourselves with all the paraphernalia of prayer, when it is stripped away the exposure *is* terrifying.

Complications do indeed set in when we start to analyse and

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intellectualise. I am reminded of the story of the athlete who, through dedication and training, had acquired a natural effective rhythm in his running that so impressed the experts that they decided to examine this phenomenon. They measured his heart beat, lung capacity, energy conversion rate, muscle extension, balance, bone structure, the lot, and marvelled how all this could come together in one man. So did the athlete when it was all explained to him, and the next time he went out to run he fell flat on his face!

In the journey of prayer we, like the athlete, have to dedicate ourselves to training to begin with – by becoming familiar with the Scriptures and spending time reflecting on the Gospels, and in due course developing a regular rhythm of prayer-time. But once a person becomes fully integrated into the gospel teaching, prayer becomes even more simple: he or she can just literally sit in the presence of God, letting go of self and in faith allowing God to be mystery. As the psalmist described it, like a weaned child on its mother's breast. No anxiety, no activity, in repose and letting my mind go where it will. Certainly no prayer expert making progress reports on how the psychic temperature is faring. All we can do is surrender to God's work, which may be terrifyingly uncomplicated but blessedly so.

If you desire to stand surrendered before God, then you are standing there. It needs absolutely nothing else. Prayer is the last thing we should feel discouraged about. It concerns nobody except God always longing to give Himself in love – and my own decision. And that too is God's 'who works in us to will and effect'. In a very true sense there is nothing more to say about prayer – 'the simplest thing out'.

SISTER WENDY BECKETT

THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

*I have come
so that they may have life
and have it to the full.*

JOHN 10: 10

Earlier we spoke of the incompleteness of human life and the whole of creation being an as yet unfinished symphony. The psalmist catches the imagery beautifully: 'You send forth your spirit and they are created. You renew the face of the earth' (103/104). This life-renewing Spirit of God, that works so intimately with the spirit of an individual, is communicated by Jesus in strikingly simple language. We are asked to imagine a shepherd whose sheep, because they live in such close proximity to him, even know the sound of his voice and learn to follow him because they recognise it.

The people who live, as it were, in close proximity to God are those who make a commitment to prayer, and those who know his voice are those who constantly reflect on the Gospels so that with deep familiarity comes a gradual understanding of the message. The call, say the Scriptures, is by name (as even today in the Middle East the shepherds still know their sheep by individual names) and it will be heard and understood by those who seriously give time to God in prayer.

The call is to self-knowledge, which is a painful process we naturally shrink from. Our instinct is for self-justification — like Eve blaming it all on the serpent, and Adam blaming it all on Eve. To make an observation that has no direct bearing on religion, I would say that what distinguishes greatness from

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mediocrity in a person is an ability to admit freely being wrong about something without putting the blame elsewhere.

The inability to perceive the truth about one's own fallibility is pride, and pride is the first thing prayer must pull down (like the mighty from their thrones). I once heard an American preacher compare the spiritual life with getting into an elevator: contrary to one's natural inclinations you have to learn to push the 'down' button first. The only way up in the spiritual life, he said, was down.

His analogy is valid enough, of course, but if only it were as easy as pushing a lift button! But most of the time we are fearful of self-knowledge, afraid we can't measure up: we need the reassuring symbols and imagery that the Gospels offer us. The good shepherd *does* lead us in our prayer, stays in close proximity, does call us by name. His gentle voice will purify us of our pride, relieve us of the anxious tension of it, and in the end reveal the new life of peaceful self-acceptance. 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.'

... the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out his flock he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, and one shepherd.

JOHN 10: 3-5, 14-16

GUIDELINES FOR PRAYER

The following represent a brief summary of the points we have discussed in the second half of this book. They are essentially practical, a checklist if you like for anyone who wants to embark on the journey of prayer.

* Ask myself, do I want to know God, do I want to try to find the true meaning and purpose of my existence? If the answer is, yes I do, this is going to involve time off the treadmill.

* Time can only be created if I really have made a conscious decision; procrastination only prevails in a situation where no genuine decision has yet been made.

* Once the decision has been made, we must work hard at a commitment to set aside a specific time daily – not absolutely rigid because life never allows for that, but our efforts must be focused on making it a *habit* that becomes a natural part of normal life.

* If you find it difficult to keep still and silent, by all means begin with fifteen minutes daily, but the aim should be to increase this to thirty minutes and ultimately to an hour. This is, after all, *the* most important relationship you will ever have.

* It is most helpful to set aside a place for prayer, a certain corner of a certain room where there will be no phones ringing or people coming and going during the time you have set aside. But do have a clock or watch to hand, so that you do not spend your time trying to guess when fifteen or thirty minutes are up.

* It is important, in the beginning, to reflect on the Scriptures

during prayer-time, especially the Psalms and the Gospels, but a *little* at a time: galloping through whole chapters is pointless. We are learning to receive rather than trying to achieve and this is best done by concentrating on one single Gospel a verse or two at a time. You could for instance begin with Mark, the shortest Gospel, remembering to receive whatever it yields and to leave whatever it does not. As you grow in faith and become more reflective the Gospels will reveal more and more, but in the beginning it's important not to be discouraged by enigmatic passages. Just leave them and move on to something that does touch you or have meaning for you. It is often helpful outside of prayer-time to use a gospel commentary. There are some very helpful and inexpensive commentaries published by Penguin.

Another way to reflect on the Gospels during prayer is to follow the Daily Missal or Alternative Service Book. Either way, what is paramount is to let God reveal himself in whatever way he wishes. It may be that a verse from the Scriptures speaks to us about ourselves, so that we are reflecting less on the Scripture than on something it has triggered off. This is perfectly normal – remember it is God guiding us in our prayer and we have to learn to surrender to whatever he does. St Thérèse sometimes fell asleep during the allotted prayer-time, and what's more was content in what she felt was her human weakness – entirely in keeping with poverty of spirit. Being there totally for God is enough.

* We need never worry about distractions. In one sense distractions can keep us humble, for those whose efforts are concentrated on achieving an empty mind are really focusing on self. We must be prepared to go to God with 'empty hands, to be poor with nothing to give'. All of which is not a licence to 'use' the time for, say, thinking through some project and calling it prayer. Our intentions are what count and they are not hidden from God. If our deepest desire is for him and we let go of ourselves, even if our minds are wandering hither and thither, he will be the Lord of our prayer.

* Emotions and feelings are not important. Some days we may feel close to God, on others that he is remote. But 'for

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richer or poorer' we must learn to stick with our commitment, accepting with St Paul 'the loss of everything. I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ' (Philippians 3: 8).

* Prayer is life. 'Anyone who follows me will have the light of life as his guide' (John 8: 12) is something that can only be lived, never explained. Whoever is committed to prayer knows that the way to God is through everyday life. It is prayer that opens our spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear him more clearly in all that we do.

* Love is his only meaning, and prayer can never be prayer unless it leads to love.