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Prayer Mercenaries



by Howard Schaap

I

At the supper table one night when I was in my early teens, my dad turned to me and told me rather formally that he would no longer be praying before our family meals. Considering the fact that, breakfast aside, he had prayed at virtually every family meal of my life up to that point, this was a rather significant announcement. Prayer could become just a rote exercise, went his explanation, and he didn't want to fall into the trap of the Pharisee in the parable, praying empty words. This did not mean, he went on, that his prayer life didn't remain fervent in other settings nor that we as a family wouldn't pray before meals, just that the task would fall to Mom or me or to individualized silent prayers. "It's not that I've stopped praying," he insisted. "You guys don't know how hard I pray." He intimated that praying was what he was doing

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before he fell asleep in front of his blaring clock radio at 9:30 in the evening, snoring profoundly, and when he woke up at 11:00 and couldn't sleep for much of the night.

I remember nodding, silently, fervently. If I was still in the nod vigorously stage, I couldn't have been 15. His logic satisfied me entirely then—in fact I saw it as somewhat noble. Now, as a parent myself who prays at the dinner table, falling into predictable speech patterns while my children's consciousnesses continue to rise all around, I recognize the desire to pull back from mealtime prayers. I find myself wondering just what it is I'm trying to accomplish when I say, "Let's pray."

Here's a laundry list of the sorts of things that worry me, divided between the two major times we pray with our children, at the table and before bed, as I myself was taught.

At the dinner table: beginning "Dear Lord" feels like a token letter opening, like "To Whom It May Concern" or, more closely, "Dear Sir"; then, "Thank you for this day" is so automatic I do not think I could not say it. What comes after that, "thank you for the bounty set before us and the hands that prepared it or the great diversity in creation that it represents or for jobs that allow us to procure said blessing," bothers me for its smugness, due partly to the fact that these blessings are literally heaping every day. Then there's some thought for those less fortunate:—"please be with those who do not have enough to eat"—which feels absolutely trite, and what we're asking for regarding those persons—"please help them"—is downright vague, while the means I sometimes suggest to rectify the problem, via our vote or our money, are more like notes to self. Then comes a rote prayer we all say together—"Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,

may this food to us be blessed,” perhaps the best part of the prayer.

At bedtime: in a modified ACTS prayer—where did this acronym even come from?—we abandoned “A,” “adoration,” because it tended to get conflated with T “thanksgiving.” It was easier to say “Thank you for the world you created” than “we stand in awe of your power in creation,” but by now the lack of “A” feels like it might erode the person of God. “C,” “confession,” has long been a problem, because focusing one-third of a six-year-old’s prayer on his

In short, I wonder about both how we pray and what we pray for. I wonder what my prayers tell my kids about me. And how long I can keep it up.

shortcomings seems a little dark, so we’ve upped the “T” and the “S” to two topics each, while the “C” gets just one item, balanced between individual sins— “forgive me for when I made my brother cry”—and collective ones— “forgive our country for spending more money on bombs than on people”—to try and keep individual sins from becoming overwhelming, but both most often feel like forced confessions. Then there are the ruts of “S,” “supplication”—cancer victims and those who’ve lost loved ones and missionaries and countries in cataclysm, like Haiti after the earthquake. These are often the most rewarding parts of the prayer, but even they trend toward the generic or toward the ruts of the rote.

In short, I wonder about both how we pray and what we pray for. I wonder what my prayers tell my kids about me. And how long I can keep it up.

II

It’s bedtime. I kneel down at my daughter Sommer’s bed, though she’s already tucked in. “Let’s pray for Jess,” I tell her. Usually, she picks the topic, and I rubber stamp her choices with a nod—a missionary and a country in crisis, two cancer patients, the usual suspects. Tonight, though, I pick. Jess is my wife’s cousin, who just lost her baby last week, in week 40. She knew the baby was a girl,

had named her Jordyn, had posted information about her on Facebook, had decorated a room for her. Days after she lost the baby, her boyfriend of several years dumped her.

“Especially because this can be a turning point in her life,” I add.

I say it and I know it’s wrong, that I’m not really thinking of Jess.

Jess is family, but her path has been much different than ours. She spurned the tribe for pop, left the church and our small town for Orlando, where she worked at Disneyworld, had a son and, the story goes, an abortion or two. Maybe this is typical gossip about a small-town girl who left for a faster world; there could hardly be a more damning claim in our small town than “abortion.”

“This can be a turning point for her,” I tell my thirteen-year-old daughter now, “because she hasn’t really had God or the church in her life and sometimes something like this can remind you of the deeper point to life.”

As a parent, you get a nagging feeling about bad behavior while it happens —manipulative or undercutting words to a spouse, domination of children—but it only flowers with reflection. I have a sense of what I should have her pray: “With the hellish upheaval in her life, with having to birth the dead child she had named, let’s pray that Jess can keep it together at all, that she can wake up every day and get out of bed and go on with life.”

But I don’t; I am using prayer as a heavy stick. I’ve made Jess a cautionary tale, and praying for a turning point is suggesting something to Sommer. Since my own sister’s teenage pregnancy, sex has been at the top of the sins-to-most-watch-out-for list in our family. Sommer doesn’t know this, of course, and so for simplicity’s sake I flatten Jess’s story and suggest the “please-God-show-her-the-error-of-her-ways” prayer. In Sommer’s actual prayer it comes off softer, purer. It’s what I’m counting on, using my children as prayer mercenaries like I do.

III

“I need to talk to you about something,” Dad began the announcement then, brown eyes behind brown-framed bifocals under a crew cut.

Dad had always presented himself as a kind of church rebel. Milt Schaap refused as a matter of

principle to sit on the church consistory or the local Christian school board. He felt that being on boards like these turned one's head, so it was for the good of his soul that he stayed off of them. But beyond this distrust was a sincere and humble piety. He measured the excellence of a minister by whether or not he would drink a beer with him in the barn. Then, after that beer, he'd get down to real soul-searching talk: of the ubiquity of sin—"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," he'd intone; of the one thing we needed unity on across denominations—"Christ and him crucified"; of the impossible ledger of his sins—his sin was always before him. After church, he trawled for the disillusioned and the doubting—not exactly for the downtrodden or the socially inept, but a prouder middle-class sort, the theologically rebellious.

This stance of his explains some of the issues surrounding my own sister's shotgun wedding. In the early Eighties, our church was still into confronting public sin, namely, teen pregnancy. Before she could get married, then, my sister was facing the awkward ordeal of professing her faith and confessing her sin in one and the same breath, an ordeal which she decided to mitigate by professing her faith and getting married in her husband-to-be's church, avoiding the public confession and thus saving some awkwardness. After she and my dad appeared formally in front of the church council to request this maneuver, the church published their response in the bulletin: they "acquiesced" to it. My dad, never a word man, still felt the smart of the diction. He brooded for months, and we left that church, switching to a nearly identical church from the same denomination in a town seven miles to the northwest.

This was the first religious crisis in my dad that I remember, the first time his deep bass went silent at the table.

That silence became an official position during the farm crisis.

Dad had sensed an Unseen Hand moving against him for years: the mountain of farm debt Grandpa Hank had saddled him with; the affliction of disease in his dairy herd that was overlooked by local vets; the drop in commodity prices due to international politics. These developments might not have left a mark on his spiritual life, howev-

er, if they hadn't correlated with my dad's theology. When Ronald Reagan swept into office and censured farmers who were "not good operators," Dad swallowed the rhetoric. If a man in the church sat in judgment upon him, Dad could make recourse to his hypocrisy via the gospels. But when Republican President Ronald Regan declared via policies and public statements, subtle and not, that he, as a marginal operator, should be sacrificed to agricultural efficiency, there was only the recourse of protest, which was incommensurate with his faith. And when the sovereign God of heaven and earth has your failure written in the political cards, what are the options? Not railing on the gates of heaven. Only silence.

IV

"It's not all about predestination," I tell my friend Jason, who fears for the rigid, colorless world he thinks I live in as a Calvinist. We've been friends for 20 years, since college, where my Calvinist heritage was a quaint if distantly related bird to the predominant flock of progressive Baptists and evangelicals. Since then, as Jason has come across more Calvinists in the world, who tend to be of a certain ilk, that quaintness has only gotten more suspect in his mind.

Jason likes to bring up TULIP, the acronym for the five theological keynotes of Calvinism: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints. Oh, he accepts total depravity right enough, agrees that the human tendency toward darkness is ground zero for the human being apart from God. It's the other "petals" he has problems with. Unconditional Election, especially in the *Scarlet Letter* version, can put too much emphasis on trying to figure out if you're chosen or not. The emphasis, as far as I can tell, is supposed to be up front, on "unconditional," the free act of God's grace upon a world that deserved none. But no adjective, not even as Christian-y a one as "unconditional," can mask the harshness of the noun "election." It's a hard doctrine, one that's marooning: it saves you from some of the peddling of evangelicalism in that it announces a larger force at work than simple salesmanship of the gospel, but, especially when trying to look from the wrong end of the glass—

God's end as opposed to the one we're told we look through darkly—it can feel like an American suburban nightmare: chosen families blessed by God and the American dream, biding time in a crumbling kingdom.

The other petals of tulip feel like modifiers of the first two: Limited Atonement aims Christ's merit at the elect; Irresistible Grace is the tractor beam of election, pulling you in, arms flailing, despite your own will; Perseverance of the Saints most often gets boiled down to "once saved, always saved." TULIP was no doubt intended to be a beautiful illustration of God's intervention in the world to bring new life, but it has also come down as formula: since everything's been determined beforehand by an inscrutable God, all we can do is watch how things play out. It's just not very postmodern.

Somehow, this TULIP got passed down to Jason, who *should* be a Calvinist, when you look at his story: born in Colombia to a teen mother who knew she couldn't care for him and brought him to an orphanage, Jason was adopted along with another baby by a couple from St. Paul since it was a real question of whether or not Jason would make it. Now, he's a family-practice doctor working in an underserved area of St. Paul and volunteering with Healthcare for the Homeless. Despite the heavy hand of God upon his story, Jason flirted with open theism in college, as did I. We'd both grown up in the blueprint view of life, where we constantly wondered if we were on the right floor of God's plan for our lives, yet were continually plagued by the sinking feeling that he was watching from the drafting room and slapping his forehead in disgust. Stumbling around, stubbing our toes the way we did, it was obvious that somebody in the world was mucking up God's plan and that somebody was—not Hitler, not Stalin or Mao, who were all somehow part of the sovereign plan—that somebody was us.

Open theism offered us a different God, one who was a kind of strip mall bum, encouraging us to go into the seedier non-white sections of the mall to see the hidden wonders and horrors of the world, clapping us on the back when we came out with ethnic foods, shrugging his shoulders if we got mugged. What did we expect, a cross-less Christianity? This God flexed with us; he'd put off some of his hyper-control in favor of relationship;

he bent with our decisions and all of history; he'd come down to bridge the gap between us, to do a ride-along of sorts, had enjoyed the ride; and his radical love quite literally meant he was sharing the controls of the universe with us, even if it meant we drove in the wrong direction. It was freeing and frightening at the same time, but most importantly it fixed the problem in the blue print world—there was no blue print.

After graduation, Jason wed open theology; I returned home to the bride of my youth, TULIP Calvinism.

Now I tell him, "Calvinism's not all about predestination; it's about redeeming all of life." But it's Jason who consoles pregnant thirteen-year-old girls by saying, "You know, Mary may have not been much older than you when she was pregnant with Jesus," while I live in my small town with a thousand people and six churches and prompt my thirteen-year-old daughter, stowed safely away in her private bedroom where early in the morning I creep in and plug in the heater so she won't have to wake up to cold, to pray for her cousin's soul in Disneyworld.

Of course, Calvinism *is*, inevitably, about predestination, in many ways. Talk around Calvinism

Talk around Calvinism for long enough, and that's what it gets back to: if God really is totally in control, then what kind of exercise is evangelism? Then what kind of recitation is prayer?

for long enough, and that's what it gets back to: if God really is totally in control, then what kind of exercise is evangelism? Then what kind of recitation is prayer?

V

Perhaps I can be forgiven for confusing John Calvin, the old man in Eric Enstrom's photo-painting *Grace*, and my grandfather when I was a kid. The name "Calvin" was sprinkled everywhere in my childhood: Calvin was my namesake uncle's

middle name, some adventurous students went off to Calvin College each fall, and, most richly, my sisters went to the church group Calvinettes. The painting, featuring an old man praying over a loaf of bread, hung authoritatively on the dining room wall of my grandparents' house, and their lives seemed to imitate its austerity in many ways. Thus, my conclusion that John Calvin reigned in my grandfather's house, that he oversaw us from Enstrom's *Grace*, and that he looked suspiciously like my grandfather, a white man with a comb-over, seems fairly well justified.

But just how many of the structures of my childhood were really nailed together by Calvin's ideas? Did his theology become the blueprint for peaked churches with long roofs? Were the ham buns made with bleached flour a Calvinist recipe of simplistic goodness? The light coffee and weak lemonade?

My dad would say that my grandfather tabulated his life on a simple ledger sheet: frugal living (no attendance at fairs or movies or athletic events or anything else that would separate you from your money unnecessarily) plus spiriting away minor profits from selling eggs for future contingencies added up to a moderate success. This was to be replicated on a spiritual ledger: simple living (see above list) plus spiriting away the interest earned for consistory and Christian school board service added up to a moderate treasure in heaven.

But in all my dad's stories about him, the one that seems to capture my grandfather's ledger-life best is this: when my uncle Howard left for the Army and Korea, he was reduced to tears at the kitchen table before my grandfather would agree to buy him a proper suitcase. Youngest son Milton watched this scene play out between his only brother, the oldest sibling, and his frugal father, and it stuck with him, especially when Howard didn't come back from Korea.

In my own memory, my grandfather is reduced to one gesture: closing the drapes before partaking of his annual birthday gift from us, Mogen David wine. My grandparents' personal lives seemed to me not just prudent but meager, even warped. I like to think that this is not simply because their tastes were different from mine, which they were—their canned beets seemed bloody and

obscene, their boiled potatoes lifeless, their homemade bread always a little stale—but because their house in my memory is silent, devoid of either real laughter or unrestrained joy.

No, this does no justice to my grandmother. On the one hand, Grandma Mary seems to have been beleaguered by my grandfather, who probably looked down on her, who definitely demanded that their lives revolve around him. Even as an old woman, I think of my grandma as the nervous housewife, evidenced by the insomnia by which she was plagued at age 80. She had floaters in her eyes, she said, and even when she closed them—especially when she closed them—there they were! and they were driving her mad. On the other hand, Grandma Mary found solace in hymns, and when she played and sang them on her organ with her warbly alto, she seemed to be literally lifted by something like hope—perhaps of a vision of leaving this life and its confinements behind. Aside from music and hymns—though these offered substantial grace—that's what her life seemed made up of to me, confinements: her house, her marriage, even her cuisine.

Incidentally, my grandparents' lives seem to represent two of the major complaints often leveled at Calvinism: it's the handmaiden of late capitalism, and it expresses antipathy toward women. In other words, Grandpa's obsession with ledgers and Grandpa's treatment of Grandma.

Presiding over my grandparents' kitchen table was a painting that was first a photograph. Enstrom's *Grace* is sort of a mimic of a still-life painting of older times. In it, a bearded, white-haired man sits with forehead resting on folded hands before a simple meal and a mammoth book with spectacles folded upon it.

It is the only piece of artwork I can remember from my childhood.

At that stage in my life, *Grace* captured what prayer was exactly. It was what old men did at the table, with predictable if weighty words about God's provision, our unworthiness and sin, and requests on behalf of missionaries, the sick, sometimes the poor. Essential, too, was the posture of the old man in the picture: sitting, elbows on the table, forehead rested on tightly-folded hands, eyes shut tight. The position presumed control of the

self, of prayer uttered from the darkness of a mind focused on one thing.

It should have been apparent that the man in the picture was not my grandfather—his venerable head of gray hair and full white beard were nothing like my grandpa’s bald pate and hairless chin. “You can’t grow hair on a cement block,” my dad said from underneath his full crew cut.

Enstrom’s *Grace*—photo by Eric Enstrom, painting by his daughter, Rhoda Nyberg—seemed to be an extension of my grandparents’ lives, perhaps to determine them. “Give us this day our daily

Calvin’s generally earnest posture is always rooted in self-knowledge.

bread,” the painting seemed to say, “and that’s all. We won’t enjoy anything else—or even know what to do with it even if you give it to us, so just spare us all the problems by giving us just our daily bread. We’ll store up the rest for future contingency. A spot in that nice retirement home they’ve got in Edgerton, maybe.”

Of course, that’s unfair. I could see in Enstrom’s *Grace*, now the state photo of Minnesota, what most probably see: the beautiful life of second generation immigrants, including Grandpa Hank and Grandma Mary, who lived on little more than God’s word and who made a world from which I benefit every day.

VI

After college and the brief courtship with open theism, I returned to Calvinism, ironically, because of a job and a wife. Ten years into a teaching career that seems to have chosen me, I found myself teaching at Dordt College, named for the very Synod of Dordrecht whence the Canons of Dort and TULIP proceed. In one of my first years as a faculty member at Dordt, I signed up for a reading group of Marilynne Robinson’s *The Death of Adam*.

Reading Robinson was like meeting the erudite aunt I never had. She was smart, direct, incisive. Despite these qualities, she actually would have fit in well at post-church coffee events at my grand-

parents’, I couldn’t help but think. After she left these coffees, she would have been talked about as eccentric, sure—too educated and kooky with her views—yet she would have been valued enough for certain things, too, to be considered integral to the community and essential to the harmony of coffee *kletz*.

That Robinson would bring harmony and pleasant dissonance to my grandfather’s house was apparent from the first words of *The Death of Adam*. “Granting evil,” she announces in the introduction, “which it seems a dangerous error to consider solvable”—yes, yes nods the coffee crowd—“human civilizations have created abundant good, refining experience and circumstance into astonishingly powerful visions and dreams, into poems and music which have fallen like a mantle of light over our human weakness.”¹

Blink, blink. It would take a while to sink in, a statement like that.

“You mean like our Christian schools?”

“Or the hymns? I love the hymns. I play them every week on my organ. I just sit here and play them and sing them.”

“Hymns, sure, but also the poetry of Milton and—”

“Our Milton never wrote poetry. He couldn’t spell. But he played the trumpet with me on my organ—”

“*John Milton. Paradise Lost.*”

“Yes it is.”

Silence.

“You get rain out your way?”

But Robinson’s a patient sort, I can’t help but think, and she would be patient with this coffee crowd for the sake of their shared foundation in something about the nature of evil, something about the nature of civilization, with Christ the linchpin between these two natures and Calvin the guide for how we get from one to the other.

For much of the world, dusting off John Calvin would seem a bold task, like a magic trick or a shape-shifting. Robinson addresses that directly. “In these essays I launched on what looks in retrospect to have been a campaign of revision,” she says at the beginning of the book, “because contemporary discourse feels to me empty and false.”² Total Depravity and election make perfect sense togeth-

er, she insists: Total Depravity describes the world that, for all its advances and corporate initiatives, remains unyieldingly bent; in that kind of world, we are then absolutely dependent on the “free intervention of grace.”³ Calvinism is not alone—either within Christianity, or among world religions—in having an elect, says Robinson, but at least Calvinism accounts for mystery: self-righteousness may fake many people out, but, in a world where “life makes goodness much easier for some people than others,”⁴ it won’t fake God out; rather, “we are all absolutely, that is equally, unworthy of, and dependent upon the free intervention of grace,” and how that grace finds us—and who it finds—is utterly mysterious.

Though the rest of the world might not talk the way Robinson does about John Calvin, it’s pretty standard fare for the coffee crowd thus far. “She is one of ours, despite her odd notions,” we smirk. But there’s more work to do.

“We’ve got to dig something up from the backyard, something that was buried and we’ve forgotten,” she says lifting a spade we suddenly realize she’s had with her all along. There’s some general dismay at this, but eventually it sends everyone scurrying but my grandfather, who remains unmoved in his green chair. In the backyard Robinson digs up a dead body, brushes him off. We all help carry him inside, set him in a folding chair.

Robinson won’t let us not talk about any part of Calvin—not Jean Cauvin himself, not his Geneva experiment, not the execution of Servetus. The kind of radical religious vision Calvin bet on in the Geneva experiment may seem absolutely naïve and even brutal to us now, but Robinson points out that this is little different from trying to base a society on political liberty or economics and nationalism, as has happened in the later centuries—also with imperfect results. That conflicts happen within church bodies, Robinson seems to suggest, is not unsurprising because they happen everywhere, in all kinds of bodies and settings. With this, perhaps, she glances toward my father.

Acquiesce indeed.

“In our modern context,” Robinson continues, transitioning to practical application a little closer to home, “we’ve replaced societal ideals like nationalism with autonomy. But autonomy to a Calvinist,

in light of the importance of grace, is the most foolish of words.” Robinson turns directly to my grandfather. “The elect are the elect not because they’ve whittled down their sins to a manageable list or balanced their ledger, so to speak.”

Yes, I think, if he was truly a Calvinist, my grandfather’s self-righteousness and sense of autonomy, as both a self-made man and Christian, make no sense.

“Or even because they’ve managed to avoid moving to Disney World and having an abortion.”

And now I realize she’s looking at me.

“It was exactly this kind of thinking that Total Depravity countered. The elect are the elect only and utterly because of the intervention of grace.”

Grace. It’s this word Sommer needs in her prayer for Jess—that grace may find her, that it may find us all.

And now, in something more than her after-church coffee voice, Robinson quotes Calvin directly:

Here, therefore, let us stand fast: our life shall best conform to God’s will and the prescriptions of law when it is in every respect most fruitful to our brethren . . . It is very clear that we keep the commandments not by loving ourselves but by loving God and neighbor; that he lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can, and that no one lives in a worse and more evil manner than he who lives and strives for himself alone, and thinks about and seeks only his own advantage.⁶

There he is, dug up and in the living room.

VII

So let him speak.

Reading Calvin on prayer, which, as a lifelong Calvinist, I’m doing for the first time at age 38, I find him, not surprisingly, earnest. I expected he would be earnest; that fits my grandfather, father, and church—and me. In Calvin’s discussion of prayer in *The Institutes*, earnestness is to be the mark of prayer, not levity, which “bespeaks a mind too much given to license and devoid of fear.”⁷ Nor may we “repeat prayers in a perfunctory manner from a set form,” performed from custom, with cold minds, but rather “must always truly feel our

wants.”⁸ Nor should we exhibit “vain speaking,” “importuning him with garrulous loquacity, as if he were to be persuaded after the manner of men.”⁹

This gets not only my grandfather’s prayers but his whole manner of being in the world. He distrusted words, humor, everything but hard figures. My dad, meanwhile, prayed seriously but opened up into hilarity during the actual meal in the form of jokes, wordplay, improvisational voices. These, too, were virtually all lost in Dad’s retreat into silence in his attempt to avoid the “set forms” of “perfunctory” prayer.

Calvin’s generally earnest posture is always rooted in self-knowledge. “[C]an we suppose anything more hateful or even more execrable to God,” he asks, slapping his forehead with his palm, “than this fiction of asking the pardon of sins, while he who asks at the very time thinks that he is not a sinner [. . .]?”¹⁰ All prayer for Calvin begins with this, the bend of the sinner: we must feel “the immense accumulation of our sins,”¹¹ he exhorts, and references the heroes of faith as examples—Daniel, David, Isaiah, quoting the latter beautifully and fully from the verse most often associated with total depravity: “Behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”

“Behold, thou art wroth”—that’s Dad, whose prayers proceeded from humility. You could hear it in his voice. Dad’s sins—and later his self-proclaimed “failure” at farming, which I think he sometimes confused with sin—were always before him.

But Calvin pushes us beyond simple humility to something even more urgent: “[I]t is by much anxiety that the fervor of prayer is inflamed,” insists Calvin. “Thus we see that the holy servants of God betray great anguish, not to say solicitude, when they cause the voice of complaint to ascend to the Lord from the deep abyss and the jaws of death.”¹² I had no doubt, even at 15, that this was exactly the sort of place Dad’s prayers were uttered from, that perhaps they floundered there, in anxiety and anguish.

For Calvin there’s also joy in the Lord—and only in the Lord—a joy that *must* break through.

In fact, the feeling in our hearts is one of the major ways we are assured that God hears our prayers. “No man,” he declares, “can well perceive the power of faith, without at the same time feeling it in his heart.”¹³ Whence proceeds this feeling? From knowing our Father as a father, who “could not have given us a stronger testimony of his boundless love than in calling us his sons. . . . Earthly parents, laying aside all paternal affection, might abandon their offspring; he will never abandon us (Ps. 27:10), seeing he cannot deny himself.”¹⁴

I have little doubt that it’s this idea—that we are to know God as a Father infinitely more loving than an earthly father—that my father had difficulty grasping, that the lack of it caused him to fall silent.

However, Calvin insists, our Father’s storehouses are unfathomable and we lay hold of his treasures through heartfelt speech in which “repentance and faith go hand in hand, being united by an indissoluble tie, the one causing terror, the other joy,” both of which emotions “must [. . .] be present.”¹⁵ Words are key conveyors of faith and blessing for Calvin; they are tools of real power and effect, and thus he distrusts music lest “our ears be more intent on the music than our minds on the spiritual meaning of the words.”¹⁶

No, for Calvin words are the currency between God and his people; words give access to the Word. Consider the power and effect of his own words for laying hold of this treasure of the Father’s love: “It is strange that these delightful promises [regarding prayer] affect us coldly, or scarcely at all, so that the generality of men prefer to wander up and down, forsaking the fountains of living waters, and hewing out to themselves broken cisterns, rather than embrace the divine liberality voluntarily offered to them.”¹⁷

VIII

As providence would have it, Dad replaces Jess in the prayer cycle. He’s gone into the hospital because, after twenty-five years on lithium, it seems to have almost completely eroded his central nervous system. Unlike with Jess, I know this situation with Dad from the inside, so I feel that I know better how to pray for him.

“How’s Grandpa doing?” Sommer asks.

I’ve forgotten by now, 25 years later, my dad’s

tendencies as he prayed, his speech patterns, the familiar ruts his language fell into. I think he typically announced “Shall we pray” beforehand, and already in that introduction his voice shifted into a lower timbre that I will always associate with the sacred. I’ve also forgotten what he prayed about most, whether people in hospitals or missionaries, whether he “theed and thoud” or used phrases like “grant us what we stand in need of” or “keep us in thy tender care.” I think he was a formal prayer, the formality appropriate for the dependency of sinners upon the grace of God.

It’s not that he hasn’t prayed publicly since then, but it’s not the same as it once was. His self-confidence is broken; his prayers self-conscious and wavering. He got out of practice, out of the rut, and never got back in. But the timbre is still there; I feel it like an ache when he does pray.

“The same. He couldn’t walk and could barely swallow because of inflammation in his brain, but that’s getting better. Now he’s just really confused and gets really agitated and aggressive and stuff.”

“Agitated and aggressive?”

“Yeah, like he’ll pick at his sheets and think he’s got to go somewhere and he’ll try to get up, so they’ve had to tie him in bed,” I say, giving her a glimpse behind the curtain, though the reality is worse still. It’s waking nightmare, all sorts of odd memories and surprising reactions bubbling to the surface. Is it the subconscious turned inside out? “It’s not him,” we tell ourselves and the nurses.

Or maybe it is him; maybe it’s all of us.

“Oh. So what do we pray for?”

“Just—pray that the doctors will be able to balance his medicines.” That would be a psychotropic miracle and something I don’t really believe in anymore.

“Dear Lord, thank you for this day,” she begins. She thanks God for the recent rains to bless the crops, though it’s been predominantly rainy and we could really use sun. She thanks God that her dance recital is coming up and for all the talents he’s blessed her with.

Well, at least she’s not self-deprecating. Yet.

“Please forgive me when I pout and don’t listen to my parents.” Okay, obvious kissing up. Must think about how to wean her off my audience and influence.

“Please be with Grandpa. Help the doctors to balance his meds so that he’s not so aggressive. Lord, please just give him peace.”

Yes, Lord, please just give him peace. Peace above all.

I know it’s a mistake to think that prayer can be new and authentic every time; I know it’s a mistake to think that beautiful words shaped into lyrical praise or effective arguments move God more than other kinds of prayer; I know from experience that often it’s the practice of prayer itself, the timbre you get used to hearing in another’s voice, that matters; I confess that my own personal prayer life is almost nil, that I’ve been putting needs and words into the mouths of my children and having them pray for me, but as my prayer mercenary prays for Dad’s peace on this night, she also grants me mercy.

This, too, is the grace of God.

Endnotes

1. See Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (NY: Picador, 1998, 2005): 2.
2. *Ibid.*, 2
3. *Ibid.*, 155.
4. *Ibid.*, 156.
5. *Ibid.*, 155.
6. Quoted in Robinson, 172.
7. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536; 1845)—Online, Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal, 2002): Book 3. Ch. 20. Section 5. Here’s the original address where I found it, though it’s no longer viable: <<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/calvin/bk3ch20.html>>. Here’s the same translation but a different site: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/calvin-institutes-christianity/book3/chapter-20.html>.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.20.6.
9. *Ibid.*, 3.20.29.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.20.6
11. *Ibid.*, 3.20.12.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.20.4.
13. *Ibid.*, 3.20.12.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 3.20.11.
16. *Ibid.*, 3.20.32.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.20.14.