



IF GOD ALREADY KNOWS
WHY PRAY?
DOUGLAS F. KELLY





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Douglas Kelly was born in Lumberton, North Carolina. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a *Diplome de langue et civilisation* francaises from the University of Lyon, France, a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Edinburgh University, Scotland.

He held pastorates in North and South Carolina for ten years, followed by two years as resident scholar for Chalcedon, during which time he was editor of the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. From 1981 to 1994 he was at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, as Professor of Systematic Theology, and since 1994 has been teaching at the Charlotte Campus of Reformed Theological Seminary. He is active as a preacher and conference speaker.

His wife, Caroline, holds a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degree from Edinburgh University. She teaches Latin in a local school.

The Kelly's have five children and live in Charlotte, North Carolina.





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CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





To Caroline Anne Frances Switzer Kelly,
beloved wife, fellow pilgrim, wonderful helper,
whose yes to me was an answer to two years of prayer.

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From early childhood in my parents' home in Lumberton, North Carolina (where my mother's mother, Ruth Parker Pate, also lived), as well as in the homes of my father's Aunt Mamie (Blue Britt) in Pembroke, North Carolina and his Aunt Maude (Blue Hendren) in Moore County, North Carolina, I lived and visited where believing prayer was the daily atmosphere. But there are others who have influenced me deeply. I am especially grateful for the life of Miss Flora A. Fraser (born on the Isle of Skye in 1889, died in Edinburgh in 1973). More perhaps than any other single person, she showed me (without knowing she was doing so) what a life of prayer is like. And I remember with great appreciation my late cousin, Mrs Neilina Kelly Scott of Heaste, Isle of Skye (1894–1983), whose almost constant intercession for us supported us through many crises.

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Finally, if God in Christ were not absolutely real and wonderfully forgiving and gracious, and if He had not constantly been answering my





prayers since I was four or five years old, you can be sure I would never have bothered to write this book.

Douglas F. Kelly
Edinburgh
June 1989







INTRODUCTION

Prayer changes the world: it makes good things happen because it gets God's will done and thus brings down His best blessings. This is the message of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the experience of God's people throughout the ages. The God of the Scriptures has great blessings stored up for His people, but He has so planned it that those blessings can only be released by the prayers of His people.

The power of prayer to change things by bringing into one's life good things (which are later seen to have been part of the eternal plan of God) is illustrated in a rather unusual romance. In 1970 an American postgraduate student from the southern states was captivated by the beauty, intelligence, and faith of an English girl who was studying, as he was, at the University of Edinburgh.

Instead of asking the attractive girl out on dates, the rather quiet Southern boy started praying hard that the Lord would prepare the girl to marry him! He prayed constantly for two years, at times beginning to wonder if he were trying to force the Lord into something that perhaps only he, rather than the Lord, wanted. And all during this time the girl showed few, if any, signs of interest – or even disinterest! Yet the lad prayed on, and one day popped the question, which to his delight was answered with a definite yes.

But had he actually forced the Lord's hand? As the years passed and children were born and the parents engaged in Christian ministry, there was more and more evidence – in small as well as in large ways – that they were truly meant for each other; that they made a team intellectually, spiritually, culturally, as well as physically and family-wise. Only God could have brought them together.

Therefore, the student's two years of constant praying, instead of getting God to do something He was hesitant to do, actually released





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the blessings of a partnership the Lord had planned from eternity. God made the plan and then used the prayers to bring His plan into happy execution.

The principle is clear: the seeking of God in prayer releases the blessing of God.

This truth is expressed very well for us in a book written by the Norwegian theologian, O. Hallesby, entitled simply, *Prayer*.¹ He said that the essence of prayer is opening the door of our lives to the risen Christ. In other words, what we are really doing in prayer is asking Him to come into our human situation, with all our many needs, and flood even our spiritual deadness with His resurrection power. This is precisely what the risen Lord is talking about in Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone ... opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”

My hope is that these brief studies on the meaning of prayer will be just that – an opening for the risen Lord Jesus Christ to invade your life and the thousand situations which burden your heart. Then you, and those for whom you are burdened, will be empowered with His resurrection life and glory. That is what you and I desperately need every day.

Not Just Theory or Technique

Being intellectual about prayer is too easy. We so often concern ourselves with the technique or the theory or the dry theology of prayer for its own sake. In fact, we listen to and even discuss and store away information without allowing it to affect our behavior.

When we lived in Scotland, we were once arranging for one of our sons to travel by train to another town to spend a few days with friends. The night before he was due to leave, we were watching the evening news on the TV and discussing the reports of railroad strikes planned for each Wednesday of that month. We were even speculating as to how long the Unions would continue with this action before some agreement could be reached.

The next day, my wife and our son went downtown to the station. It was deserted – not a train in sight! Eventually they found a small chalkboard announcing that since it was Wednesday, no trains would be running. Now, both of them could have repeated the information that had been on the news, but it had made absolutely no impact on their behavior!





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This can so often be true with the subject of prayer. We discuss and debate the issue and then actually fail to seek the face of God. As a professor of theology, I know how strong that temptation can be! Intellectual pride can sometimes keep the door of our lives closed fast to the reality of the glory and power of Christ's disturbing, but ultimately uplifting presence. Let us be aware of this harmful temptation. Dr James I. Packer recently remarked, "(The) most crucial problem I have found in these communities over the years ... is (how) to make our theology serve our godliness; to make theological education advance our Christian discipleship."

He was wise to the dangers of theorizing because students would sometimes tell him at the end of a theology course, "God is not so real to me now as He was when I started. Though I know more about Him, He seems now more distant to me, and I am less excited about Him than I was." Packer wisely says, "When a student speaks like that, his theology and his discipleship have been disconnected."²

We should make sure that our theology and our discipleship are thoroughly connected so that we can be more godly, praying, and prevailing men and women of the Cross, the empty tomb, and the power-filled heavenly throne! Thus we seek to understand what the Bible teaches about the meaning of prayer in a way that will inform our minds, warm our hearts, and move our wills.

True Prayer

What could be better, if we desire to understand and act upon the meaning of prayer, than to sit at the feet of Jesus, our great High Priest. Now, what is the value of having Jesus as a priest? What does a priest do?

The priest represents the people before the altar. He offers the sacrifices, and it is he who offers the prayers on behalf of the people.

Jesus, as our Great High Priest, represents us before the heavenly altar. He has permanently opened the way to God for us through the sacrifice of his *own* body, so that we have the assurance of direct access to God when we pray. And He continually prays for us.

We do not have to go to church, or have someone who is ordained pray for us in order to have our prayer heard. We can go through Jesus, who is still a priest in heaven, praying even now for his people. He is the one, above all, who knows how to pray, whose prayers are effective. And he it is who gave us that most perfect form of prayer, "The Lord's Prayer."





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Thus the first chapters of this book are deliberately based upon that prayer. By looking at the structure of this divine formula, we should be able to discern the very heart of the Biblical theology of prayer.

Although we will look at some of the specific petitions of the prayer in detail, that is not our primary goal. Rather we want to get to the root of what prayer really is, and use the Lord's Prayer as much as possible to help us do this.

We will discover that the various sections of the Lord's Prayer are like powerful magnets which draw together in orderly fashion all the separate multitude of prayer texts scattered throughout the Scriptures.

This prayer is in the sixth chapter of Matthew as well as the eleventh chapter of Luke. Now, Matthew 6 is a part of the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount, and in this section, Jesus deals with three distinct expressions of the religious life as they were summarized in Judaism.

In the first verses He warns His disciples against doing "alms" (KJV), "charitable deeds" (NKJV), or "acts or righteousness" (NIV) before men with the wrong motive. From verses 5 through 15 He warns about praying as the hypocrites do, and then at verse 16, He raises the question of fasting. Thus almsgiving, praying, and fasting are the focus of our Lord's teaching here.

Probably He has in mind the way the Pharisees of His day had perverted the religious life from something that was good, beautiful, and true into an externalized and harsh system of religion which actually drove people away from God rather than toward Him. So He is actually not only dealing with those three major points but also with how those points had been corrupted by the Pharisaic interpretation of religion in His time.

The reward of the Pharisees was that they were seen of men. Ironically, our Lord is saying their prayers will be answered, but since they are only praying with the desire to be seen of men and to be thought of as praying men, then their prayer is answered, and they have their reward on earth and earth only. They have made no impact for eternity.

In verse 7 Jesus says the heathen think they shall be heard for their "vain repetitions." Well, if they were not heard for their vain repetitions (and Jesus says they were not), then what are we heard for when we pray? The answer to this is in the Lord's Prayer.

God First

Have you ever been in a church which has somewhere on the walls a representation of the stone tablets on which God wrote the Ten





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Commandments? Usually the first tablet lists the first four, and the last six are on the second, illustrating that the first relates to God and the second relates to man. Thus, God is first and man is second, which is the only right approach to the meaning of life.

In exactly the same way, we can divide the Lord's Prayer into two basic sections. The first section, Matthew 6:9-10, deals with God: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The second section of the Lord's Prayer deals with manward realities and human considerations, which also have a legitimate, though secondary, place: daily bread, debts, and temptation.

Perhaps we could say that the Lord's Prayer is really a variation and an exposition of verse 33 of Matthew 6, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." In other words, the first half of the Lord's Prayer deals with the kingdom of God and its righteousness and the second half of the prayer deals with "all these things" which shall be added to us: the pardon, the provision, and the protection.

Significantly Jesus says "do not worry about tomorrow for ... sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (v. 34). In other words, if we can get the first part of the prayer right, then the second part of the prayer will surely follow. If we get the will of God, the kingdom of God, and the hallowing of God's name right, then we will be all the surer of having the second part of the prayer answered when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

The Humanistic Lie

Let me say here that the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, Matthew 6:33 and Genesis 1:1 and the whole Bible, are totally opposed to the spirit of the age in which you and I have been called by God to live. We live in an age when secular humanism is dominant. We simply do not think first of God when we face difficulty. On a lighter vein, this kind of attitude is reflected in the story of a nervous passenger in the days when people traveled to Europe by ship.

As a serious storm was threatening the vessel, she grabbed the Captain wailing. "This is terrifying. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Well, you can always pray," answered the Captain.

"Oh no," she cried. "Is it as bad as that!"





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This may be a humorous story, but most of us can identify with the sentiment. God, if He exists, is simply a last resort.

This kind of reasoning is most evident in *Humanist Manifesto I* of 1933 and *Humanist Manifesto II* of 1973. Those secularist thinkers, who influence so much of our modern culture, believe that man and not God should be first. Indeed, they wish to exclude God completely. They feel that the idea of God is very harmful and dangerous to our evolutionary progress.

Such “man first” and “man only” thinking has caused God and Christianity to be increasingly excluded from modern culture and especially from our school systems. For example, the 1987 Public School Textbook Case in Mobile, Alabama, impressively demonstrated the systematic exclusion of any serious reference to God or to the influence of Christianity in both European and American history. It argued that humanism had become a substitute religion for Christianity and had excluded the Biblical point of view from textbooks.

For example, many school texts have replaced the designation, B.C. with the initials, B.C.E., when referring to dates. Rather than directly refer to the birth of Christ as the starting point for historical dating in the West, they have introduced the phrase “Common Era”, to eliminate the historical reference to Christ. Seen from that perspective, Christianity is presented as basically a social phenomenon, a temporary religious movement, rather than the turning point of history.

So our culture disposes us to put man first and then either to deny God or at the very least relegate Him to an inferior, unimportant status or to a last resort. The Pharisees did the same thing in a different way. They acted as though what people thought of them in the community was the final reality, whereas Jesus showed that was not the case at all. What matters is how we stand with God.

If we are aware of this man-centered tendency of our modern society, it will alert us to how radically different Biblical prayer is from the normal approach to life these days. To get our thinking and our praying in tune with the Spirit of Christ, we must ask the Holy Spirit to help us stretch our minds. Only then can we be lifted by faith above the oppressive, humanistic atmosphere with its basic premise that the only thing that is real is that which is material. When we think only in terms of what we can see and understand, we lack categories that recognize the supernatural, and thus miss some of the answers to our prayers.





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A God Who Hears

When our oldest son was born, he was legally blind in one eye. With treatment over the years his eye has become fairly functional, if he is wearing glasses. However, when he was in seventh grade, the other eye, his good one, was hit by a racquetball. All of a sudden we faced the prospect of our son's vision in both eyes being seriously and permanently impaired.

For a few days he was out of school and could hardly watch TV, much less comfortably read a book. We alerted many friends and prayer meetings to pray for him. There was even a group of inmates praying in a local jail! When his sight did not improve much after the swelling had receded, it was time to have a specialist run some tests.

His mother took him into the office, where the technician ran a routine eye exam with an eye chart. Then dye was injected into the bloodstream to facilitate taking special pictures of the retina. Finally the specialist arrived to interpret the results. Nothing seemed to be wrong! There was a little scarring, but that was all!

My wife was amazed and slightly embarrassed. "What were the results of the eye exam?" she asked.

"They were fine!"

"But yesterday, he could hardly see out of that eye! How could it happen so fast? People have been praying, but..."

"Sometimes," answered the doctor, "that is what will do the trick."

We had been praying for a miracle, but when it came, it was almost as though we did not have a way to recognize it. My wife had to ask herself, "How else would a miracle look, if not like this?" and fight back the inclination to give the sudden improvement a purely natural explanation.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to convince us that materialism is the devil's lie in this generation to rob us of the greatest, sweetest, most powerful blessings of God for our lives. May the Holy Spirit use these studies on prayer to convince us that the living, triune God is the most important factor of all.

A New Perspective

From this point of view then, every true prayer is a trumpet against secularism and an opening of the door to the reality of the glory and power of the risen Christ to flood into our entire situation. The key to life's meaning and the key to true prayer is God first, mankind second.





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Hence our studies in theology of prayer will follow this pattern laid down for us by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer. These eight chapters will take us into the very heart of the Biblical theology of prayer. They are written in a way that will help us not only understand the truths, but also move us to trust, to praise, and to pray. And we will discover that, far from being dry or merely intellectual, theology can be a handmaiden leading us to confident action.

