



**THE
POSSIBILITY
of PRAYER**

**FINDING STILLNESS WITH
GOD IN A RESTLESS WORLD**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PRAYER



THE CRAB NEBULA is an exploding star about forty-two hundred light years away. I first learned about it in Annie Dillard’s *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Light from this exploding star first became visible to earth in 1054. It was a supernova then, so bright it could be seen during the daytime. A thousand years later, the star is still exploding.

What explodes for a thousand years? What has the density and size to keep up this pace?

If you look at the Crab Nebula today through binoculars, it looks like a little ring. If you stare at it, even with earnest stillness, you will see no movement. The naked eye clothed with binoculars looks at this exploding star, and it seems more like a statue. “Photographs of the Crab Nebula taken fifteen years ago seem identical to photographs of it taken yesterday,” and yet the Crab

Nebula is expanding at the rate of seventy million miles a day, and it's been doing that for millennia.¹

We are in a universe where something that has increased in size by over a billion miles wide over a fifteen-year period goes unnoticed. Currently, I am sitting in an apartment in the northeast corner of the United States, which is on a planet that is 1.5 billion times larger than my body. The Crab Nebula expands twenty-nine hundred times larger than earth *every* day. And yet it is a fairly small blip in the grand scheme of schemes. Why is it a fairly small blip? Because before now chances are this is the first time you have given much sustained thought to this wonder of light and beauty. The Crab Nebula is a constantly expanding firework that lights up whole corners of the universe, and for hundreds of years, anyone conscious enough to give attention has not given it much attention at all.

It is false humility to call ourselves a speck in the universe. Put your hand over your mouth (Job 21:5) and consider that the exploding Crab Nebula is a speck. What are we?

Looking at a picture of the Crab Nebula, we see its astonishing beauty. But realize that its light pushes out thousands and thousands of light years away, and we begin to grasp how much of the beauty we do not sense. Star worship is ungodly, but the Crab Nebula proves that the temptation is not unreasonable.

Who is this God of exploding stars, and what have we to do with him? God is infinitely larger than this light god that's expanding seventy million miles a day, and God's glory is more majestic than this speck pushing its light to anything that can see, thousands of light years away. And we have a universe full of Crab Nebulas, their glory shining from end to end.

Somehow humans have pondered the idea of communicating with this God of exploding stars. Did we inherit this insanity? Are we sure we want to call upon this Being to give attention to us? He blew up the Crab Nebula and sends the warning flares of his exploding power for any being conscious enough to see for thousands of light years in every direction. He is not gentle with specks, so how do we know he will be gentle with us? The Crab Nebula is a witness to us who ponder prayer, “Beware! This is a possibility!”

Recently, a man drove onto a sidewalk in lower Manhattan and plowed over a group of cyclists and then got out and shot more. Eight were killed in a moment, and several more injured. We lamented this tragedy on Sunday morning at our church. A room full of people gathered in the morning and evening and asked God why. We wept and prayed.

The death of a star causes beauty and wonder for billions of miles all over the universe for thousands of years, and the universe shrugs. *Our* death produces a pile of ash, and we demand the attention and explanation of the divine. And isn't this explosion a witness to a pattern of the universe: destruction and chaos rather than care and mindfulness? Who wept for the Crab Nebula? Who has taught us to weep rather than shrug? Worse, where does our arrogance come from that we are offended at the God of exploding specks when things go terribly wrong?

Many philosophers and public intellectuals have suggested that humans would experience new freedom if we would evolve past this irrational self-importance and just live. “Perhaps it’s ridiculous to take ourselves so seriously,” says Thomas Nagel.² Live and shrug. As Alison Gopnik puts it,

Ultimately, the metaphysical foundations don't matter. Experience is enough all by itself. What do you lose when you give up God or "reality" or even "I"? The moon is still just as bright; you can still predict that a falling glass will break, and you can still act to catch it; you can still feel compassion for the suffering of others. Science and work and morality remain intact. Go back to your backgammon game after your skeptical crisis, Hume wrote, and it will be exactly the same game.

In fact, if you let yourself think this way, your life might actually get better. Give up the prospect of life after death, and you will finally really appreciate life before it. Give up metaphysics, and you can concentrate on physics. Give up the idea of your precious, unique, irreplaceable self, and you might actually be more sympathetic to other people.³

Yet, despite the witness of the Crab Nebula and even the encouragement of some of our philosophers, Christians have sought to pray to this God and seek his comfort, wisdom, love, forgiveness, attention, and help. We seek to know this God of exploding stars and trust that though he is dangerous, he is good and loves us. Christians believe that God is not only mindful of our trouble, but he desires to give us glory and pleasure in himself.

Prayer is either the greatest insanity or the most wonderful news.

Prayer is calling on God for his attention. We ask him to turn away from the exploding stars and supernovas and give attention to our trouble. We ask him to show us mercy. Why would we think this is a good idea?

There are many explanations for why we have the confidence to pray. But the place to begin is the doctrine of the incarnation of God. God, in history, put on our humanity. Jesus Christ was not only a man but God. He was the God-man, as Christians have called him. He is God-come-to-us—to be with us and to *become* us. Anyone deciding to pick up the vocation of prayer needs to be newly and deeply aware that something impossible has happened: God, in his absolute being, has resolved to make himself known and seen and felt and touched in human life.

Prayer is not possible because we have somehow made ourselves worthy of God's attention, but because God has made himself known to us. We did not have to ascend like phoenixes out of our ashes to get God's attention, but God descended into the depths of dust with us.

In the first century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote in a letter,

There is only one God,
revealed by Jesus Christ his Son,
who is his Word sprung from silence.⁴

Jesus is the Word sprung from silence and put in flesh. Here is the mystery that we all should taste and see: Other religions create programs for men and women to purify themselves, to be worthy enough, or to be one with the divine. We must transcend our existence, they tell us, to be with God, to reach God, to be worthy of God. We must put off our flesh, our humanity, our weakness, our passions, and reach for God. And if we are elite and spiritual enough, God reaches back. But Jesus is the God who came down. He condescended to be with us. He put on *our*

flesh, *our* humanity, *our* weakness and took hold of us. He experienced our humanity that we might experience his glory.

This is almost sheer madness. If the difference between us and God is as terrible as the exploding Crab Nebula suggests, which is the more reasonable way? That humans transcend their insignificant existence and try to become great enough, holy enough, worthy enough for the God of exploding stars to give attention to? Or that God, in his love, made himself lowly enough for us to know and embrace him?

Either we must put on divinity or he must put on humanity. Which is more reasonable? Both seem like madness, but only one is good news.

Annie Dillard attended a small congregation in a town in Northwest United States. The singing was awkward and the preaching was boring. *Is this the kind of worship and proclamation the God of exploding stars deserves?* she wonders. Come to think of it, is any worship and proclamation of any church worthy of him?

A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens. Week after week Christ washes the disciples' dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, It is all right—believe it or not—to be people. Who can believe it?⁵

The Incarnation is the way God has come close to us. Jesus lived on earth, as God and man, serving, eating, drinking, talking, sleeping, and dying. He was weak and needed strength. He was tempted in every way we are and yet, in a very human way, found power in the Spirit to resist. He rested and prayed. He feasted and wept. He spoke truth and defended the poor. In fact, he was poor—homeless, at times. In other words, he didn't just have a "human experience," as someone who visits London for the weekend has a "very British experience." He *was* human. Immanuel. God with us.

When we are going through trouble or pain, we're tempted to wonder at how God could understand our trouble, our pain, our loss. How could he? He's perfect and never needs anything! How many prayers begin with, "But God, you just don't understand!" God can grasp complex formulas and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the universe—but does he know my pain?

The incarnation of God teaches us to see differently. A god who cannot comprehend our pain or understand our trouble is a false god. The God of Jesus Christ knows what it means to be poor, to be troubled in spirit, to suddenly lose his best friend to death, to be falsely accused, to be slandered, to be abandoned by his closest companions, to be misunderstood by family, to be mocked, ashamed, humiliated, and hated. He knows what it means to face death. In the incarnation, "God becomes our neighbor."⁶

Here's the deeper mystery: when Jesus died and rose again, he arose not as an angel or as something else more than human. He was resurrected as a man with a body, glorified and new. When he ascended to the heavens, his body didn't just slip off

as he rose past the clouds. He was resurrected, fully man and fully God, and he has made himself available to us by his Spirit. As the old church fathers used to say, the resurrected and ascended Christ lets us pray “as his contemporary.” He becomes our neighbor and friend, our companion and our intimate.

The mystery of our faith is that God is at the same time *beyond* us, *with* us, and *in* us.

The witness of the incarnation, Christ’s suffering, and the resurrection point us to a deeper data of how to think about prayer than the evidence we see in the universe. Exploding stars and the suffering of violence are only partial evidence. We are tempted to believe a shrug is more reasonable than our desire for God’s attention and mercy.

But somehow God does not shrug. Instead, the life and sufferings of Christ, the Son of God, give us deeper evidence of God’s participation with us—that God is present in our world. We may not be able to fully explain the presence of evil and suffering, but the answer cannot be that God shrugs. The weeping, suffering, and dying Christ won’t let us give that answer.

And so Christians have prayed. Jesus commands us to. He tells us to pray God *into* our trouble, and in exchange we enter his joy.

In Matthew 9, Jesus is having a meal with a disreputable crowd. “Tax collectors and sinners,” they were called. Tax collectors have always had less-than-appealing profiles among us, but this was more menacing. Tax collectors were traitors to the first-century Jewish communities. They were Jews who were working for the Roman government, an oppressive regime, to gather and collect tyrannical taxes. They were the enforcers and

often took more for their own pockets. They were working for the ruling powers who defiled their temples.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus was “reclining” with them. He feasted and found friendship. The religious leaders found out about this dinner and thought this was out of bounds for a teacher like Jesus, and they rebuked Jesus and his disciples for it.⁷

Jesus responded, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:12-13).

Let’s follow the words of Jesus to “go and learn” what this means.

I was looking at an old journal in which I had written some reflections on this passage. I concluded that I ought to be more ready to spend time with those who may cause me to feel uncomfortable or out of place because they have different values and lifestyles. I need to be friends with people Jesus was friends with and eat with people Jesus ate with.

Of course, that is a perfectly legitimate implication of the story, but it’s a disastrous first step. The first question in reading stories like this is not, What did Jesus do and how do we do it? but What does Jesus offer and how do we put ourselves in a position to receive it? Jesus is trying to get us to see not who we need to be befriending but what we need to be in order for Jesus to befriend us! And, of course, Jesus befriends the sick and needy.

My initial reading of the story put me above the needy and sick. It made me a *helper* of the sick, a *friend* of sinners, not a sick sinner myself. Without realizing it, I read the text to affirm what I obviously believed and lived, all the while feeling very

virtuous. Who wouldn't want to be known as "helper of the sick" and "friend of sinners"?

Here is the first step of prayer in a universe where God has put on flesh to be with us: we must put ourselves in the way of his friendship to sick and needy sinners. The heart naturally resists this posture and disposition. If we see ourselves as healthy and self-sufficient, invulnerable and spiritually impressive, we will miss Jesus' healing and friendship. "Go and learn what this means," he says. It takes time and honest observation of our hearts.

Jean Vanier once told a community who lived and served the mentally disabled in Trosly, France, "Jesus did not say, 'Blessed are those who serve the poor,' but 'Blessed are the poor.'" Vanier said that if we want to sustain a long-term ministry to people who experience a kind of poverty that many will never experience, we must become poor ourselves.⁸ It's a vocation that will garner us no praise or thanks. We will be forgotten and overlooked. The mentally disabled these people were serving didn't have the capacity, most of the time, to express thanksgiving or praise for the help they received.

Henri Nouwen reflected on Vanier's words by saying, "It is the way to poverty. Not an easy way, but God's way, the way of the cross."⁹ If I'm poor and sick, then serving the poor and sick looks more like solidarity and friendship than condescension or benevolence.

"Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus said (Luke 6:20). That's a tough pill to swallow. If that seems confusing or a step too strange for you, it could be that you need patience with this instruction of Jesus. I would encourage you not to move past this too quickly. "Go and learn what this means," Jesus says. Resist the urge to move on.

It is a blessing to serve the poor. But Jesus tells us there is a deeper blessing that's a step or two before that: To be poor is the place of happiness. To need what Jesus has to give. To be in the posture of reception to his healing. Here is the beginning place of prayer: neediness, ready for blessedness.

Our modern world often sees our neighbors, relationships, marriages, religion, family, and civic engagements as enhancements, like a gym membership to enhance bodily health. Things that previous societies might have seen as obligations, we see as enhancements. They are meant to add and benefit, but the minute they begin to require sacrifice, become difficult, or challenge our assumptions, we move on. They aren't enhancing anymore.

Many of us see God like that. And so we think of prayer, too, as an enhancement. But if we take the posture characteristic of what the New Testament calls us toward—poor and needy for him—then our prayers will begin to take a deeper turn.

Just as Jesus says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” so we can say, “Blessed are the sick sinners, for theirs is friendship with Jesus.” Matthew says that Jesus “reclined” with sinners and tax collectors. It's an image of intimacy and friendship, of letting down your guard. I long for this kind of friendship, I just don't long for feeling needy.

If I'm needy, I'm out of control. I'm not in control of my reputation, and I'm at the mercy of Jesus. But his arms are everlasting arms. I can trust them. It is a good friendship. I am learning that it takes time to see how sick and poor I truly am, and it takes time to learn how trustworthy his friendship truly is.

You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book? (Psalm 56:8)

I often resist bringing my troubles to God because I just don't want to think about them. They are burdensome for a reason, and it's easier to keep them compartmentalized and stuffed down. But with that comes needless burden carrying. And when I don't cast my own cares upon him, I can't carry the burdens of others.

"You have kept count of my tossing." I can imagine here the Lord watching and counting over me as I toss at night. Why do we toss? I suppose it's our body giving witness to the restlessness of our hearts. The Lord watches over this. It isn't exciting work; I'm sure exploding stars are more interesting, but he's interested. He gathers my tears and takes note of all my trouble.

He keeps count of my tossing just as he keeps count of my hairs. I don't think there are any narcissists in the world who love themselves enough to give attention to the detail of how many hairs are on their head—but God loves us that much. And it's not just impersonal facts about us that God keeps track of—the psalm makes clear that he doesn't stop there. He counts my tossing, gathers my tears, and makes notes about my trouble in his book. He's mindful and watching. He counts *one, two, three, four* . . . This is his work of presence with me. He notices and loves me.

I don't count my own tossing. When my wife asks me how I slept, I don't answer with how many times I tossed and turned, nor do I pay much attention to my tears other than to wipe

them away. But he notices. If he knows these things, how much more does he know my trouble?

This is the universe we live in, where exploding stars that expand at the rate of seventy million miles a day can go unnoticed and unregistered to human beings, but where God keeps count of my tossing and gathers my tears. Who can believe it?

Now we are ready. We are in a universe made for prayer and perfect for beginners. Yes, principalities and powers tempt us to resist, and we have habits and muscle memories that keep us distracted and fearful of quiet. “Teach us to pray,” Jesus’ disciples asked him.

There is much to learn, but it’s easy to get started.

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