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# *Acting in the Wake*

Prayers  
for Justice

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COLLECTED PRAYERS OF  
WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, VOLUME 1

**WALTER BRUEGGEMANN**

WITH BARBARA DICK

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## FOREWORD



In his teaching, preaching, writing, and praying, Walter Brueggemann testifies to a deep and abiding relationship with both the biblical text and the astonishing God who abides in and cannot be disentangled from that text. Both seem to grasp him without ever quite being grasped by him.

He puts on the biblical text like a well-worn, coarse-wool coat. It's no comfy barn jacket, nor a glorious coat of many colors. It's a garment that never quite fits: it pinches, scratches, bunches, and binds; it's a little too warm in the summer and not warm enough in the winter; and it's never really in style. Yet there's no imagining him going out without it. Brueggemann understands that this peculiar text lives and moves and has its being in our own peculiar lives, individual and corporate, as we grapple with it and try to put it on. He reminds us that one must keep one hand on the page, with all its odd particularity, and the other on one's own oddly particular passion, pathos, and pain.

There is nothing like sitting around a seminar table and a biblical text with him. He always puts his whole self into his engagements with the text and with his students, and he expects no less from them. Still, as exciting as it is to be in the front row at one of his lectures, ducking

flying chalk fragments and dodging a right jab as he reenacts Moses parting the Red Sea, what is most remarkable is his love for this fascinating and often disturbingly strange text that we call Bible. He helps us understand that biblical theology, like all good theology, is at its best poetry, a bold and subversive act of creative world-making, inviting us to imagine bold alternatives to the prose-flattened script of commodification and violence that the empire wants us to believe is the only realistic possibility. In so doing he shows us what he means when he writes, in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, that “the interpreter must be an at-risk participant in a rhetorical process in which being is regularly at stake in and through utterance.”

Nowhere is this risky imaginative participation in alternative world-making more in evidence than in his public prayers. Indeed, I still remember many of the prayers he offered at the beginnings of seminar meetings when I was his student in the late 1980s and early '90s. There were never any polite formalities of opening and closing; he would simply walk into the room, drop his stack of books and notes on the seminar table, and start talking. I don't recall him bowing his head or folding his hands or closing his eyes. He just started in, without warning. Sometimes it took the rest of us in the room a second to realize that he, indeed we, were now in prayer. One especially memorable prayer went something like this:

We walk through minefields  
wondering where you might show up  
to rescue or undo us.

I believe that was it, the whole thing. No “Let us pray,” no “Dear God” to start, no exposition or explication of the terse words, no “Amen” to finish. Only this densely concentrated, profoundly fraught utterance from “we” to “you.” We walk. You show up, rescue, undo.

Then as now, his prayers always began with either “we” or “you.” The one to whom the prayer was addressed was not some third-person God that we already know *about* from inherited doctrines and confessions. Allied with Martin Buber’s understanding of the “I-thou” relationship between oneself and another, as opposed to an “I-it” dynamic of separation and objectification, these prayers invoked a “we-you” relationship in which each party is vulnerable to and impinged upon by the other in ways that cannot be objectified or reduced to formulae.

I don’t recall him ever typing or writing out his prayers back then. Nor does he. Thankfully, he did write them out for other public occasions, and eventually he started doing so for his classes. And so we have the remarkable gift of this book. Along with his earlier collections, the prayers gathered here carry that distinctive at-risk theological generativity that we so need in these times. They are boldly experimental, creatively and provocatively drawing from the biblical pool of imagination in order to conjure new social and theological possibilities on new horizons of meaning. Akin to his understanding of the prophetic imagination as poetic and world-creative, his prayers are often stunningly affronting, echoing biblical rhetorical patterns and images even as they interrupt and



subvert them. He experiments with language in ways that break onto startling images of and agonistic engagements with God.

Echoing Buber's *I and Thou*, another title for this book could have been *We and Thou*. As Brueggemann writes, its division into "Prayers of *We* Justice" and "Prayers of *Thou* Justice" aims to make clear that justice work is a "bilateral, covenantal enterprise" between the work "we" do and the work "you" do. "The *we-prayers*," he writes, "bespeak a resolve to engage in the troublesome, glorious work of justice as our proper human preoccupation. This work of justice requires of human agents courage, stamina, energy, and durability, because it is labor against greatly entrenched powers that are in part propelled by demonic resolve."

Still, the title he has given us is *Acting in the Wake*. What to make of that? In the wake of what? In the wake of catastrophic sufferings and injustices, to be sure: there are prayers from the near wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and other terrors; and prayers in the wake of devastating political moments; and prayers in the midst and wake of war. As he reminds us in other writings, all these wakes are aftermaths of our delusional claims to chosenness and exceptionalism, and they call for forms of prayer that can help us break through such delusions toward paradoxically humbler yet bolder action.

But there is another potential meaning of "acting in the wake," one that comes from the prayer that bears the same title: acting in the wake of "you," our "gospel God."

We live and move in your wake.  
and so after you;  
we practice your habits of justice,  
    your well-being,  
    your safety,  
    your mercy and your compassion,  
    your faithfulness.

Acting in the wake: living and moving and having our being in your wake, following after and drawing close to your best, most just ways of being in this world. And therefore acting, and praying, in the wake of Jesus, who “has broken the force of violence” so that we are free to act and speak differently, with one another and with you, *Thou* Justice.

Timothy Beal

## PREFACE TO THE COLLECTED PRAYERS



From early on, the Christian tradition has understood prayer to be “a conversation with God.” Already in the fourth century, John Chrysostom took prayer as “continual conversation with God that proceeds from longing for God.”<sup>1</sup> His contemporary, Augustine, added, “Prayer is the conversation of the heart addressed to God.” I learned that formulation from the catechism in this way:

Prayer is the conversation of the heart with God for the purpose of praising him, asking him to supply the needs of ourselves and others, and thanking him for whatever he gives us.<sup>2</sup>

My father, August, my pastor and confirmation teacher, shortened it for us thirteen-year-olds:

Prayer is the conversation of the heart addressed to God.

Since prayer is conversation with God, it is crucial at the outset to identify this God. This is not “the unmoved mover” of Greek philosophy. Nor is this the “ground of being” of more contemporary philosophy. Rather, the God who is party to this conversation is the one traced out graphically and

dramatically in the memory of ancient Israel. This is the one who is pledged in loyalty to benefit God's people and to the well-being of creation, and who is known to exercise a full range of emotional capacity. This God can be attested only in imagery and rhetoric that is personal and interpersonal, so that God can be impinged upon, is capable of response, and can readily be the subject of active effective verbs. Unless and until God is trusted and voiced in the dialect of Israel's memory, it is likely that we will not have entered into the dramatic depth and saving helpfulness of biblical prayer.

At the outset, this means that such practice of prayer resists the popular familiar renderings of God as "omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient," in order to embrace covenantal, relational categories that are, for example, on full exhibit in the poetic construal of Hosea:

I will take you for my wife in *righteousness* and in *justice*, in *steadfast love*, and in *mercy*. I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the LORD. (Hos. 2:19–20, emphasis added)

These five terms set forth the profoundly interpersonal casting of this God to whom we may pray.

This shift from the safe philosophical categories to the risky exposé of covenant engagement is difficult for many people who have been socialized and nurtured into the reasoned terms of modernity. That reasoned way of articulating God tempts us variously to self-sufficiency because God cannot and does not engage, or to timidity because God

cannot be moved by our best passion, or to despair because we are on our own. But prayer cast in the covenantal categories of a biblical life-world has no need to settle for self-sufficiency, timidity, or despair.

The notion of prayer as conversation is rooted for Christians in the Old Testament practice of prayer that is variously rendered in the book of Psalms, the book of Lamentations, and the traditions of Moses and Jeremiah.<sup>3</sup> Thus Moses could remonstrate with God and engage in back-and-forth, face-to-face exchange:

O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." (Exod. 32:11–13; see vv. 14–17)

In the depth of Israel's crisis, Moses' prayer is simply asking:

If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although

this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.  
(34:9–10)

In each of these cases, Moses' prayer caused God to act afresh.

Jeremiah's prayers closely echo the laments of the book of Psalms that variously voice *complaint*, *petition*, and *doxology*:

Why is my pain unceasing,  
my wound incurable,  
refusing to be healed?  
Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,  
like waters that fail.

*Jer. 15:18*

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed;  
save me, and I shall be saved;  
for you are my praise.

*17:14*

Sing to the LORD;  
praise the LORD!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy  
from the hands of evildoers.

*20:13*

Karl Barth looms large in any effort to articulate a Reformed, evangelical notion of prayer. His remarkable discussion of prayer, so instructive for me, sets prayer alongside faith and obedience, so that the triad of "faith, obedience, and prayer" must all be taken together.<sup>4</sup> While Barth's thought is complex enough, I single out three claims that

have been focal for my own thought and my own prayer.

First, Barth asserts that prayer is “simply asking.”<sup>5</sup> Barth of course acknowledges other dimensions of prayer, but sees petition as the core act:

Asking is the only thing that he can do, the only spontaneous response that he can make. When he asks for it, when he says to God: I have not, and Thou hast; Therefore give me what Thou hast and I have not, he acknowledges and magnifies God Himself as Giver, and he honours the divine nature of that which he is able to take and receive.<sup>6</sup>

Barth dares to identify the church as “the asking community”:

Thus the asking community stands together with its Lord before God on behalf of all creation. . . . The asking of this community anticipates as it were that of creation as a whole. It gives voice and expression to the groaning of creation.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Barth recognizes that prayer impinges upon God and changes God:

God is not deaf, but listens; more than that, he acts. God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence on God's action, even upon his existence. This is what the word “answer” means.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in The Heidelberg Catechism that Barth cites:

For my prayer is much more certainly heard by God than I am persuaded in my heart that I desire such things from him.<sup>9</sup>

This of course is the crucial point of prayer. The statement that our prayer can effectively impinge upon God is a deep embarrassment to any modern person. That is why we get the familiar cant that “prayer changes the one who prays” or “families that pray together stay together.” Such instrumental value may be correct, but it is beside the point. To be sure, God answers our prayers in freedom; that, however, does not tell against the God who answers. This point requires, for many people, a radical revision of our sense about who God is. And, *mutatis mutandis*, it requires an alternate sense of self and a fresh sense of the we who constitute the “asking community.”<sup>10</sup>

Third (what I suppose I have gotten from Barth via Jacques Ellul) is that we pray because we are commanded to pray. This is not the command of a fearful tyrant. It is rather the command of our caring father to whom we turn when we “come to ourselves,” of our engaged mother who does not forget compassion for the children of her womb (see Isa. 49:14–15). It belongs to us as beloved children of God to pray. Such prayer is constitutive of our being because our being is as trusting children who may ask, seek, and knock in order to receive what we need for our lives. Thus, for Barth, an evangelical discernment of prayer requires a practice of faith and obedience that is completely at odds with the practice of most conventional piety and spirituality.



A second, more accessible instruction in prayer is *Help, Thanks, Wow* by Anne Lamott.<sup>11</sup> While I did not learn these basics from her, Lamott's book has well chronicled for me a helpful taxonomy for prayer. Her book title suggests three moments that are characteristic of prayer.

First, *Help!* The acknowledgment of dependence in the form of petition echoes Barth's "simply asking." For persons who have "come of age" on modernity, such asking for help seems superfluous. Except, of course, that we arrive, soon or late, at a failure of self-sufficiency, if nowhere else, then as we are confronted with the threat of death. But, of course, the threat of death comes in many forms and different degrees all day long. Indeed, one may conclude that the normative narrative of the Bible begins with Hebrew slaves exactly at that moment of an urgent cry for help amid the deathly demands of Pharaoh:

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. (Exod. 2:23)

It may be (as with these slaves) that the petition for help is, in the first instance, not even addressed to anyone. As that text has it, however, the emancipatory God of the exodus is like a magnet that draws such desperate petition to God's self even if not addressed to that God: "Their cry for help rose up to God." Or, as Isaiah wondrously has it later:

Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
*Isa. 65:24*

Second for Lamott is *Thanks*. God's generous attentiveness evokes gratitude that becomes the mainspring of a life of joyous obedience. Thanks, of course, is the glad awareness that we are not, cannot be, and need not be self-sufficient. Thus, gratitude pervades a life of faith:

Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:17–18)

Paul, moreover, sees that thanks provides a framework for petition and identifies the practice of thanks to God as a forceful antidote to worry:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil. 4:6)

In this bottomless gratitude, Paul recognizes that everything we have is a gift that we did not produce or possess:

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (1 Cor. 4:7)

Third for Lamott is *Wow!* A biblical rendering of wow is the practice of praise, the eager, glad, unrestrained ceding of self over to God and God's goodness. Such a wow is an embarrassment for the self-sufficient because we are swept away in awe before the one who is the source of our life. Rather than the cheap glib *awesome* of popular

culture, the act of wow-praise goes to the depth of our existence. Such a wow is beyond the specificity and inventory of thanks wherein we “count our blessings.” Praise holds nothing back in calculation concerning the God-giveness of our lives in daily proportion. Such *wow* may be as brief as Israel’s shortest psalm:

Praise the LORD, all you nations!  
Extol him, all you peoples!  
For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.  
Praise the LORD!

*Ps. 117*

That psalm lacks the specificity that we may bring as we sing; it invites focus on the utter reliability (*’emeth*) and tenacious solidarity (*hesed*) of God toward us. Or we may sing wow with the utter self-abandonment of Psalm 150:

Praise him with trumpet sound;  
praise him with lute and harp!  
Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!  
Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!  
Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!  
Praise the LORD!

*vv. 3–6*

Such a *wow* has no need for specificity because the wonder is all the way from the self over to God who

defies all our best explanatory reasoning.<sup>12</sup> Given the modern “turn to the subject,” wow-praise is a subversive activity because it is an eager, passionate “turn away from the subject” back to the Thou who makes the self possible.

Lamott’s triad is hugely instructive. I suggest, however, that a fourth capacity belongs indispensably to faithful prayer: *Rats!* The faithful know that, many times, things do not work out, the center does not hold, and death crowds us. Such lived reality may be voiced in honest prayer to God concerning a variety of adversaries. The faithful, replicating ancient Israel, keep before God something of an “enemies list,” the names of those whom we may wish ill:

May his children be orphans,  
and his wife a widow.  
May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.  
May the creditor seize all that he has,  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.  
May there be no one to do him a kindness,  
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.  
May his posterity be cut off;  
may his name be blotted out in the second  
generation.

*Ps. 109:9–15*

Of course, Jesus taught us to love our enemies. But before that is possible, we must tell the truth about our enemies to God, all of the truth, including our worst hope for them.

In our faithful prayer, moreover, we do not hesitate to call God to account. God is not an automatic

answering machine; God works in freedom. Those who pray faithfully need not hesitate to call God to account and so summon God to faithful action when God is seen to be remiss:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?  
Awake, do not cast us off forever!

.....

Rise up, come to our help.  
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.  
*Ps. 44:23, 26*

Every day I call on you, O LORD;  
I spread out my hands to you.

.....

But I, O LORD, cry out to you,  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
*Ps. 88:9, 13*

It may, of course, be judged that such prayer is *pre-Christian* or *unchristian*. That, however, is not the case because the church always has before it the psalms of lament, complaint, and protest from the Old Testament. We need only consider that Jesus is remembered for his accusation of infidelity from God on the cross:

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; see Ps. 22:1)

It is that reality of deep abandonment that scars the life of both Father and Son. Jürgen Moltmann has

it forcefully:

The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted self as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.<sup>13</sup>

It is the prayer of the forsaken! The faithful who pray have always known and trusted that the God addressed is the one “from whom no secret can be hid.” We need not hide that dark side of our consternation; we may properly voice it in our conversation of the heart addressed to God. When we consider the regime of *help/thanks/wow/rats*, we have before us the full spectrum of human reality, all of which is offered to God in honest trust.

The practice of leading public prayer (as in the prayers in this collection) is an act of inviting and engaging the present company in that conversation of the heart. As a result, the voicing of prayer needs to be specific enough to have content, but porous enough not to coerce, permitting others present to bring their own nuance to that conversation of the heart. I suggest two exercises of prayer that may aid in this invitation and engagement. First, I have found it helpful to pray Scripture back to God. In my case, as a teacher of biblical texts, I have found it useful to appeal to the text under study as a guide to structure a prayer for the day. The most dramatic instance of which I know of praying Scripture back to God is the exemplar of Exodus 34:6–7 being employed by Moses in Numbers 14:18. In

the Exodus passage, God's self-disclosure to Moses goes like this:

The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation.

In a subsequent crisis in the wilderness, Israel has experienced God's neglect and indifference, which places Israel in peril. Moses prays to God in a way that calls God to account and reminds God of God's own self-disclosure, as though God has forgotten God's own commitments:

Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, "It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them

in the wilderness.” And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,

“The LORD is slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression,  
but by no means clearing the guilty,  
visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
to the third and the fourth generation.”

Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now. (Num. 14:13–19)

The core act of Moses is to reiterate in verse 18 the very words of God in order to remind God of who God is and what God has promised. The appeal is followed in verse 19 by an imperative petition from Moses grounded in verse 18: “Forgive the iniquity of this people according to your steadfast love” (so clearly declared back in Exod. 34).

In verse 20, it is reported that God responds to the imperative of Moses. I have found that very many texts serve well for such a “pray back.”

Second, prayer that engages the assembled community in the conversation with specificity and porousness requires an act of playful imagination so that we may move beyond the familiar and predictable clichés with daring suggestiveness. Such imaginative playfulness invites attentiveness to image and metaphor, and a turn of



phrase that might be joltingly honest, risky, or even contrary. Thus, the conversation aims not simply to repeat the familiar but to engage both parties to the prayer (God and the assembly) in a fresh discernment of the issue at hand to which response may be made.

The prayers in this collection have arisen in actual practice in many local congregations and in many seminary classrooms. They are, to some extent, time and context specific, though I judge they may be useful resources for our ongoing practice of public prayer.

This collection, consisting of many of my public prayers, has had a meandering development. The blessed Ed Searcy worked long over them. The beloved Joe Phelps did attentive work on them as well. And the blessed, well-beloved Tia Brueggemann saw to its completion. I am grateful as well to David Dobson and the staff at Westminster John Knox Press (as I always am!) for willingness to publish the collection. I am grateful to my treasured colleague, Timothy Beal, for writing a generous foreword. And I am grateful to the host of the faithful who have prayed these prayers along with me. Prayer allows us to enter into blessed companionship. At the same time, it is also our ultimate defense against the seductions of self-sufficiency, timidity, and despair, and a means of resistance against instrumental reasoning and commoditization, against the force of Death that surveils us relentlessly and aggressively. The catechism can make for us a final affirmation, albeit in a patriarchal dialect:

Our heavenly Father desires us and all his children to call upon him with cheerful confidence, as beloved children entreat a kind and affectionate father, knowing that he is both willing and able to help us.<sup>14</sup>

### Notes

1. John Chrysostom, "Homily 6 on Prayer."
2. *Evangelical Catechism* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1929), 59.
3. See esp. Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 265–88.
5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 268.
6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 274.
7. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 279.
8. Karl Barth, *Prayer: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 13.
9. *The Heidelberg Catechism: 400th Anniversary Edition 1563–1963* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1962), 126.
10. On the we of the asking community, see Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 236, 325, and passim.
11. Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).
12. On wonder as the depth of faithful engagement, see William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); Abraham Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1987).
13. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 243.
14. *Evangelical Catechism*, 60.

## PREFACE TO VOLUME 1



The God of the gospel has always cared in urgent ways about restorative socioeconomic and political justice. In our time, however, it has required the stirrings of liberation theology to teach us again about the centrality of justice for gospel faith. These stirrings have included the great initiatives of the Latin American church, and in more recent times the quest for justice for Black people (lately Black Lives Matter), for women (lately the MeToo movement), and the cause of LGBTQ+ persons. Under the tutelage of such movements we have learned afresh that justice for the left behind, excluded, and disempowered requires reallocation of societal resources and redistribution of political power. Thus justice entails disruption of business as usual in the body politic, a disruption that predictably disturbs those of us who have been privileged and advantaged by current arrangements.

The *We-Thou* juxtaposition of these prayers indicates that the work of justice is a bilateral, covenantal enterprise that involves both human work and the work of the gospel God. The *we-prayers* bespeak a resolve to engage in the troublesome, glorious work of justice as our proper human pre-occupation. This work of justice requires of human

agents courage, stamina, energy, and durability, because it is labor against greatly entrenched powers that are in part propelled by demonic resolve.

At the same time, we know that justice cannot be simply a human enterprise, because it is labor against “principalities and powers”; its eager exercise requires the resolve and engagement of the holy God (see Eph. 6:12). Thus *robust resolve* on our part for justice is matched by *robust confidence* in the authority and capacity of the holy God to whom we pray. The God to whom we pray for justice is no “nice God” who readily fits into our preferred comfort zones. Rather, this God is an active agent who works God’s own holy purpose for the full restoration of creation in all its fruitful splendor. It is the work of our *Thou-prayers* to urge, move, and mobilize God to actions that authorize and cohere with our own faithful actions for justice.

Those who pray the *we-prayers* are often, like me, beneficiaries of great privilege. Thus the prayers are in fact a bold contradiction of our seeming best interest. We pray such prayers, nevertheless, because we have come to understand that our “seeming best interest” is less than the health of the community (and the world) of which we are an inescapable part. Those who pray the *Thou-prayers* are those who have moved beyond our comfortable bourgeois religion to grasp in some serious way the radicality of the gospel. Indeed, whenever we pray, we address the God who, via Moses, has declared, “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue” (Deut. 16:20). That verdict via Moses, moreover, is echoed and reiterated

by Jesus in his warning to the religious establishment of his day:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!  
For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the [Torah]:  
justice and mercy and faith. (Matt. 23:23)

Thus these prayers—the *we-prayers* of resolve and the *Thou-prayers* of petition—are words and actions that have confidence in the coming governance of God. In a deep way, all of our faithful prayers are echoes of the church’s great prayer for justice in which we bid that God’s kingdom will be “on earth as it is in heaven.” The Lord’s Prayer is an act of defiant hope and expectation. All of our other faithful prayers are articulations of that same hope. When the church prays that prayer and its other prayers, it acknowledges the “kingdom, power, and glory” belong only to the Lord of creation, and to none of the pretenders who stalk the earth. In the end, all of our prayers for justice are variations on “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). This petition is not some imaginary dispensationalism. It is rather the conviction that God’s rule shows up here and there, sometimes hidden, sometimes dramatic. Whenever and wherever Jesus comes in his rule, justice is on its way. This is justice that permits heaven and earth to sing as creation comes to its full wondrous performance:

Say among the nations, “The LORD is king!  
The world is firmly established; it shall never  
be moved.

He will judge the peoples with equity.”  
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, all that fills it;  
let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.

*Ps. 96:10–15*

Every time we join in *we-prayers* and *Thou-prayers*, we join this great anthem of expectation.

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