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A SMALL COLLECTION

When You Don't Have Your Own Words

Prayers for the seasons when your own have run out.

MATTHEW STARNER

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If you are here, these are for you.

Prayer is not a performance. It never was. Somewhere along the way, many of us were handed a version that felt like one — with expectations about length, feeling, and the right words to say — and when we could no longer keep it up, we assumed prayer itself had failed.

It hadn't. The version we were given had.

This small collection exists for the seasons when your own words have run out. When the practice feels impossible. When you don't know how to begin, and everything you try to say feels hollow. These are borrowed words — from Scripture, from the ancient prayer of the church, from centuries of Christians who prayed them when their own words failed too.

You are allowed to borrow them. That is part of what they are for.

Read them slowly. Pray them out loud if you can, or silently if you can't. Repeat them until they mean something, or until they don't need to. Keep this near — a nightstand, a bag, a car — and reach for it when nothing else is coming.

Prayer is still available to you. Even like this. Even now.

— Matthew

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those
 who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

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The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.

This prayer has been used in the Christian tradition for over a thousand years. Pray it slowly, and repeat it. Some Christians pair it with their breath — the first half on the inhale, the second half on the exhale. Use it when you have no other words.

Psalm 23

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Perhaps the most prayed passage in the whole Bible. Pray it in a hard hour. Pray it at bedside. Pray it when you cannot say anything else and someone has asked you to say a prayer.

Psalm 88

- ¹ O Lord, God of my salvation,
I cry out day and night before you.
- ² Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
- ³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to the grave.
- ⁶ You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
- ⁹ My eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call upon you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
- ¹³ But I, O Lord, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
- ¹⁴ O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?
- ¹⁸ You have caused my beloved and my friend
to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.

(selected verses)

This is the darkest psalm in the Bible. It ends without resolution, without answer, without light. Which is why it belongs here — because sometimes what you need to pray is a prayer that doesn't tie things up neatly. This psalm doesn't ask you to feel better. It gives you words for the darkness that will not lift.

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
2 O Lord, hear my voice;
let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy.
3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
4 But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.
5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
7 O Israel, hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
8 And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.
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One of the seven traditional penitential psalms. The Latin church has called it 'De Profundis' – 'out of the depths' – for over fifteen hundred years. It has been prayed at the graves of the dead and in the middle of the night by those who could not sleep. It knows where you are.

Three Collects

A collect (pronounced KOLL-ekt) is a short, gathered prayer — from the Latin word meaning 'to gather together.' These have been prayed by Christians for a thousand years or more. They are dense, careful, and complete. Reach for one when you want a whole prayer in a few sentences.

THE COLLECT FOR PURITY

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily praise your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE COLLECT FOR THE WORD

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A COLLECT FOR PEACE

O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works proceed: give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and that, defended by you from the fear of our enemies, we may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

WHEN EVEN A SENTENCE IS TOO MUCH

A Few Words

Some prayers are short enough that you can pray them without deciding to. Repeat them. Whisper them. Say them once. Any of these counts.

- Lord, have mercy.
- Kyrie eleison.
- Come, Lord Jesus.
- Help me now.
- Into your hands.
- I don't know how to pray. Please.
- Thank you.
- Be near.
- Show me the way.
- Even now.

"Kyrie eleison" (KEER-ee-ay ay-LAY-ee-sohn) is Greek for "Lord, have mercy" — one of the oldest prayers in Christian worship.

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A LAST WORD

You do not have to be able to feel it for it to be real. You do not have to produce it for it to count. You do not have to have the right words, or any words at all.

When you cannot pray, the Spirit prays for you with groans too deep for words. That has been true all along.

Prayer is still available to you.

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Pray without ceasing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:17