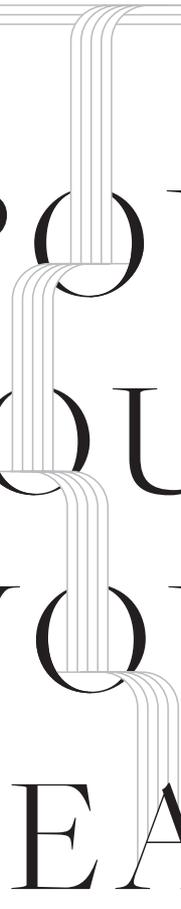




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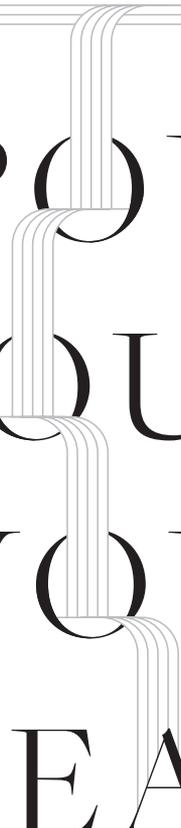
*Discovering Joy, Strength, and Intimacy  
with God through Prayer*

Jeremy Linneman



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A prayer for all those who are dry, disconnected, or stuck:

*For those who haven't felt the warmth of God's presence—  
For those who struggle to relate to God as Father—  
For those who can't find joy or peace in this life—  
For those who feel trapped in relationships of hurt, abuse, and  
emptiness—  
For those ensnared in the grip of poverty, mistreatment, and  
addiction—  
For the chronically sick and sore, the depressed, the anxious—  
For the orphan, the stranger, and the widow—*

*Father God,  
All-powerful God of heaven and earth, of mountaintop and  
wilderness,  
Heal the sick; bind up the broken; restore the lonely.  
Set the captives free, O God.  
Fill us with your Holy Spirit.  
Make us like your beloved Son.  
Grant us your joy, peace, and strength now and forever.*

*Let the outpourings of our hearts be precious in your sight.  
Through Christ our King,  
Amen and amen.*



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# Introduction

A few weeks ago, my friend Todd pulled me aside after our community group gathering. We had finished our discussion time with about twenty minutes of prayer together, and he was both challenged and encouraged. He said, “I’ve been a Christian for decades, but I’ve never learned to pray.” He continued, “I know I’m supposed to pray. But I don’t know what to do. I love Bible study, and I like serving. But for some reason I can’t explain, I just don’t really pray.”

I have some version of this conversation at least monthly, typically when a new person or couple joins our church and is trying to make sense of our significant emphasis on prayer. Why is this the case? Why is prayer so difficult? If prayer is such a constant theme in the Scriptures from beginning to end, why do many Christians feel like they don’t know how to pray and feel little desire to develop a praying life?

Of course, there are many folks who love prayer. They don’t just value prayer as a concept; they actually pray. Deeply. They believe it really does something. They feel intimately connected to God, and as a result, their lives are marked by a gentleness, increasing

maturity, and relational quality that many of us are seeking. What do they know that we don't?

There are many reasons why prayer doesn't come easily for us. We're busy people. We haven't been trained in prayer. It's just difficult to sit still for more than five minutes without sweating in distraction. These are all true, but I think it goes deeper than all this. And recently, an unexpected source helped me see this clearly.

---

Ricky Gervais is a British comedian and actor best known for writing and starring in the original BBC version of *The Office*. Gervais's standup comedy specials are not exactly clean, and he is an outspoken atheist. But on a recent tour, he joked about his faith and shared his views on prayer.

“People ask me, ‘Do you pray?’ No. I don't mind if you pray. People say ‘I'm praying for you,’ and I say ‘thank you.’ But if you cancel the chemotherapy, I'll say, ‘Don't do that.’ Do both. Pray and do the chemotherapy. Because doing both is the same as just doing the chemo. If you're going to do one, do the one that works.”<sup>1</sup>

I laughed at first. Gervais is a master of delivery. But then something settled in like a dark cloud. At the time, I had been a Christian for most of my life—one who regularly prayed at the start of every day. But as I reflected, I realized Gervais's remarks might indeed represent my own view of prayer more than the biblical vision. More than *might*; they did. My commitment to prayer was often agnostic—as if I believed in the existence of the Divine and

mentally assented to the importance of prayer, but didn't engage deeply with a personal, living God.

If you witnessed the weakness and inconsistency of my prayers in that season of my life, you'd likely conclude that I didn't really expect all that much out of prayer, opting instead for the things that "worked."

Following my life closely, you'd undoubtedly conclude that I relied far more on my intellect than the Holy Spirit, more on my own energies than the power of God. You'd watch every morning pass as I, functionally speaking, said a few weak prayers and then opened my eyes, laced up my Nikes, and got to work as if it all depended on me.

Or at least, that's until a few years ago, when I began to discover the joy and power of prayer.

---

Toward the end of 2019, I was experiencing a dangerous level of fatigue and apathy. Nothing was utterly falling apart—I've been there before, and this wasn't that—but I was struggling through daily life. My spiritual life was dry, and I could barely feel God's presence and love. Our little church plant was stumbling through its infancy stage, and our three boys were wonderful and exhausting at once. I was keeping my rhythms of Scripture, prayer, and fellowship, but I felt discouraged and powerless.

I was running on the mercies and energy of the past, and I was reaching the bottom of the tank. I began crying out to God with a mixture of lament, accusation, and petition. Desperation, as it turns out, is a key ingredient in prayer.

In this wilderness season, I cried out to God in the spirit of Lamentations 2:19:

Arise, cry out in the night,  
as the watches of the night begin;  
*pour out your heart like water*  
in the presence of the Lord. (emphasis added)

The Lord met me powerfully and gently in that wilderness season of pouring out my heart. I can't say it was a sudden or explosive experience—like the ones I've read about in memoirs by Augustine and Blaise Pascal—and I didn't reach the third heaven. But nonetheless, over the course of a few days, I felt swept up in the powerful mercies of God. His presence felt so real and tangible. His Word leaped off the page. I prayed for hours on end. I even gave fasting another try after years of avoiding it.

Now, let's be clear: I have not become a prayer expert, nor have I become a super Christian. My journey is simply deepening. Said another way, I've come to understand these moments as personal "times of refreshing . . . from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). For the next few months, my prayer life came fully alive. I had newfound energy for life. My sweet wife, Jessie, was overjoyed I had been lifted from my funk. My boys could notice a difference in me. In my ministry relationships, I timidly brought up my renewal to our leaders, and several of them were experiencing something similar. Something remarkable was happening.

Over the past few years, my prayer life has ebbed and flowed; many dry seasons and powerless morning quiet times have come and gone. But as I've pressed further into the presence of God, he has been gracious and faithful to meet me with an increased love

for him and for others. Perhaps you know this feeling well too. Or perhaps you long for it.

These days, I'm simply asking for *more*—more of God's presence, more of his Spirit's fruit ripening in my life, more Christlikeness as I walk with Jesus. To seek more of God is not to be discontent, but rather it's a content, sitting-on-the-Father's-lap prayer of a weaned child, seeking to be fully engaged in God's presence (Ps. 131:2).

---

These days, I still reflect on the comedian's words—"don't do prayer, *do something that works*." But I'm also seeking to remind myself just how much prayer really does.

## What Exactly Does Prayer Do?

*Prayer welcomes us into the embrace of the Father and retrains us to live from belovedness.*

*Prayer uncovers our fragmented lives and invites us into wholehearted living.*

*Prayer is the means by which God moves history toward the renewal of all things; it leads to breakthrough.*

*Prayer invites us to face pain and suffering with honesty and hope.*

*Prayer opens us to a life of celebration and thanksgiving and teaches us to praise.*

*Prayer connects us to other believers more deeply and the mission of God more fruitfully.*

*Prayer increases our experience of the Holy Spirit's presence and power.*

*Prayer reorients us to eternity—the coming new creation.*

In short, prayer does stuff. And I'm not the only one who has discovered this.

Over the past few years, along with my own spiritual awakening, our little church has caught a vision for prayer. We have a long way to go, but we have become a praying church. Our calendar is filled with prayer meetings, and people are praying with joy, passion, and power. We've seen people experience profound inner healing. We've seen marriages restored. Members have seen their long-time friends come to Christ and be baptized. Lives are being changed, and it's not our music, our level of production, and (certainly not) our preaching. It's prayer.

Our lives are powerless apart from prayer. Prayer is the way in which we enter the presence of God and gain access to his strength, peace, and wisdom. And the more we experience God's presence in prayer, the more we will keep turning to him. Prayer cultivates a hunger for God. Prayer makes us more content (we are happy with *less*) and hungrier for God's presence (we only want *more*). But that doesn't mean it comes easily.

---

I wonder if you can relate. Do you struggle with busyness, distraction, and, most deeply, the plaguing fear that prayer might not

do much at all? And do you know why you have this plaguing fear? Because you've been lied to your entire life, just as I have. You've been told that everything depends on you. As a result, you move through life in a lonely, anxious hurry. You must grind. You must hustle. You must *make things happen*.

But life is not supposed to be a grand flurry of effort.

When you approach our Father with the posture of an eager child, with a humble faith and spirit of expectation, you really can receive a heart at rest and move out into the world with joy, peace, and power. If you're holding this book, I believe it's because you hear a gentle voice within calling you deeper. You want to pray with joy and power. You want your life to go deeper in lament and higher in praise. You want more of God. You want *something*.

Why hold it all in? He knows what you want and need. Pour it out. And God promises to pour his own joy, peace, and strength into you. "Pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (Ps. 62:8). "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:7 NLT). "Pile your troubles on GOD's shoulders—he'll carry your load, he'll help you out" (Ps. 55:22 MSG).

He really means it. Come before the living God and pour out your heart. Don't worry about getting your prayers right. Don't try to clean up your thoughts and feelings first. Don't hold back; he can handle it. Pour out your fears, frustrations, and struggles; pour out your hopes and dreams and desires. Let it flow like water.

Pour out your heart, and God will pour something back into your heart. He will fill it with joy, peace, and strength. He will pour his very own love and power into your life. This is the invitation to prayer.

If this is what you want to experience—if you're ready for a deeper, more vibrant, more unpredictable life with God—then keep reading.

---

*Father,*

*You are our hearts' truest desire.*

*Thank you for calling us to yourself.*

*Thank you for the Son, opening the way back home for us.*

*Thank you for the Spirit, revealing who you are and empowering our lives.*

*Thank you for leaping off the porch to embrace us when we turn back to you.*

*Oh Lord, we need more of you. Or at least, we want to want more of you.*

*Come, Lord. Amen and amen.*



# Receiving the Father's Embrace

I grew up in a wildly charismatic church in the 1980s. And I mean *really charismatic*—think open mic for prophecy, regular testimonies of miraculous healing, and plenty of flags and banners. (So many banners!)

On one hand, it was wonderful. There was true delight in worship, there was complete embrace of risk and faith, and there was a sense of expectation in prayer. On the other hand, there were many excesses, and emphasis was often misplaced. The preaching of the gospel was not consistent and balanced. And unfortunately, there were some deeply hurtful abuses of position and power.

As I look back on the years spent within that community of faith, one thing always sticks out in my memory: the simple, self-forgetful, childlike faith.

In my adult years, I came to discover and embrace Reformed theology, expository preaching, and the beauty of the liturgical

and contemplative traditions. I am deeply thankful for my current body of faith here. But I haven't lost that early experience of happy delight in the presence and people of God.

These days, I'm hopeful that in my lifetime, I will see the best of these two traditions come together more fully. In the meantime, I'll admit a secondary aim of this book: to help my beloved Reformed brothers and sisters learn from the passion, simplicity, and power of their charismatic counterparts. (Much more on this later.)

Perhaps no one has expressed the need for this synergy more than the modern-day Reformed patriarch, Ray Ortlund Jr. In a podcast for The Gospel Coalition, Ortlund reflected on growing up in the Jesus Movement of the sixties and later joining the Reformed, gospel-centered tradition. He said:

I don't think that we generally—we gospel [centered] types—we have not experienced a corresponding resurgence of relational beauty. . . . We've all been so enriched and strengthened and helped, and the truth of the gospel has been clarified for us all. But we have not had the same resurgence of relational beauty. I don't know anybody that's downright mean. But . . . we need to—very carefully, reverently, joyously—attend to, cultivate, and build the intangibles of the relational beauties that the gospel itself calls for and creates.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, you can believe in the *gospel*, hold to solid theology, and enjoy well-ordered churches and yet barely experience the *relational beauty of Christ*. What a tragic loss! Who told us we have to choose between the truth of God and the presence of God? I'm not interested in a faith that considers God's Word and intimacy

with him to be an “either/or.” No one would say this explicitly, but our churches often represent one to the exclusion of the other.

In my own life, in my pastoral ministry, and—to be clear, in this book—I am eagerly rejecting this “either-or.” I’m pursuing the “both-and.” I’m setting out to embrace two things: the clear, once-for-all *gospel truth* and its result, a burning passion for the *relational presence* of God. Gospel and presence. Word and Spirit. Doctrine and delight.

How do we cultivate a life like this? How do we hold these things together? I believe the answer lies in Jesus’s most well-known teaching on prayer.

---

Jesus must have been delighted when his disciples asked him how to pray. I mean, his disciples asked Jesus *a lot* of bad questions.

When the Samaritans don’t welcome Jesus in their town, James and John ask, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” (Luke 9:54). Not surprisingly, Jesus rebukes them. At the moment of Jesus’s transfiguration, Peter says, “I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Matt. 17:4). Mark and Luke’s Gospels makes sure we know, for all time, Peter did *not* know what he was talking about (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33).

But occasionally they get it right. “Teach us to pray,” they ask (Luke 11:1). Our Lord must have been beaming with joy at the opportunity to teach his beloved friends how to enjoy fellowship with his Father. For this question, he doesn’t rebuke them. He doesn’t ignore them. He teaches them.

## How Not to Pray: The Pharisee's Prayer

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't begin his teaching with how to pray but how *not* to pray. He points them toward the religious leaders of the day. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others" (Matt. 6:5). In other words, as the most important theology book of our generation (Sally Lloyd-Jones's *Jesus Storybook Bible*) puts it, "They really weren't praying as much as just showing off. They used lots of special words that were so clever, no one understood what they meant."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus sets before us one way to pray, a posture we might take: It's the Pharisee's prayer. The Pharisee (or hypocrite) prays, in the words of Jesus himself, *to be seen by others*. In a world obsessed with image, appearance, and perfection, even prayer can become a means of gaining others' attention and approval. We'll look at this in more detail in the next chapter, but it's important to see the contrast before Jesus invites us into the correct posture.

## But When You Pray: The Child's Prayer

The first approach to prayer that Jesus describes is the hypocrite's prayer—the overflow of a performative spirituality, rooted in insecurity. What, then, is the proper approach to prayer? Jesus next describes how to rightly approach God. "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 6:6).

Where the hypocrite plans his prayers and takes them out to the synagogues and street corners, Jesus's disciples are to stay at home, go into their rooms (in the Greek, the word typically referred to a

pantry or closet) and close the door. The hypocrite prays to be seen by others; the disciple prays to be seen by God.

But this posture is not merely the disciple's prayer; Jesus goes one step further. Remember, he says, "pray to *your Father*, who is unseen" (6:6, emphasis added).

Now, let's pause and let the full weight of this phrase sink in. The Israelites had thousands of years of history following God. They had the stories of creation and the garden, they knew the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; they had the wisdom of the Proverbs and had memorized many Psalms. They worshipped in the temple, gave tithes to the poor and needy, observed the Sabbath, and celebrated dozens of holy days. Their lives were appropriately religious and (in varying degrees depending on the person) God-centered.

But this was new. Although the Old Testament occasionally refers to God as Father to his people (Deut. 32:6; Ps. 103:13; Isa. 63:16; 64:8), this was not a regular thought for the people of God. For Israel, God is predominately known as Creator, Redeemer, Shepherd, and Almighty God. But Father? Let's not get too carried away.

But suddenly, Jesus is on the scene; he's the Son of God and the exact imprint of God, he is "one with the Father" (John 10:30). He is, to quote the *Jesus Storybook Bible* again, "everything God wanted to say to the world, in a person."<sup>3</sup>

Sure, God loves to be Jesus's Father, we might think. After all, Jesus is doing a pretty good job of being a Son. He is eternal and perfect and holy. He doesn't sin. He never disappoints his Father. Why wouldn't God *love* his Son, Jesus? We believe all this. But God as *our* Father? Here we may stumble. Yet Jesus was abundantly clear.

"Close the door and pray to *your* Father." (Matt. 6:6, emphasis added)

“Then *your* Father . . . will reward *you*.” (v. 6, emphasis added)

“Do not be like [the pagans], for *your* Father knows what *you* need.” (v. 8, emphasis added)

“This, then, is how *you* should pray: ‘*Our* Father in heaven.’” (v. 9, emphasis added)

“If you forgive other people when they sin against you, *your* heavenly Father will also forgive *you*.” (v. 14, emphasis added)

“But if you do not forgive others their sins, *your* Father will not forgive *your* sins.” (v. 15, emphasis added)

There we go: Six references to God as Father—and not just Father to Jesus, but Father to *you*—in Jesus’s very brief instructions on how to pray. Do you see the posture Jesus invites us to take? It is simply and boldly *the child’s prayer*.

## Rediscovering God as Father

What’s the difference between approaching God as merely a strong and powerful and compassionate God and approaching him first and foremost as our Father? This difference will be felt throughout all of life, but nowhere more deeply than in prayer.

Many people struggle to approach God as Father and understandably so. Many folks that I sit with have only known “father” to be a hurtful person or complicated relationship.

Adoption is one of the most important and beautiful elements of the gospel, some would even say the core message of Christianity.

It reveals God's heart and unlocks the Scriptures for us in a way nothing else does. Spiritual adoption is simply the truth that God makes us his own sons and daughters when he saves us through the work of his Son Jesus. He didn't have to make us sons and daughters. It would have been enough to make us part of his kingdom, as citizens or servants. But we learn of God's heart when we witness something unexpected: he doesn't stop there.

Though it's a wonder that God would make us citizens of his kingdom, the truth is he doesn't need slaves or servants or citizens. He doesn't need anything. But he wants something. *He wants children.* The theologian J. I. Packer has said if you want to know how well a person understands Christianity, "find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all."<sup>4</sup>

Some years ago, my sister and her husband went through the long and difficult and expensive process of adoption. Anthony was born into a difficult environment in a different part of town. My sister and her husband had been wanting to adopt for years, they worked with an agency, they did home studies, they saved money, they filled out paperwork, and finally they became Anthony's foster parents. After years as Anthony's foster parents, the process was completed, and they went to the courthouse together. Finally, the judge declared Anthony to belong to Drew and Sarah and banged his gavel. At long last, he legally belonged to them. It's objective, it's definitive, it's legally-binding, it's forever. And yet, it was far more than a legal transaction. It represented something so beautiful. Though there is certainly loss and complication involved, a child in need now has a safe, new home.

That's the good news of adoption. You were an orphan, homeless and hopeless in a dangerous world. But God put in the work, took the steps to do it legally, and then bent down and picked you up into his arms. As the apostle Paul put it, "those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:14–15).

There's the exodus language: you are no longer slaves. But it's not just *salvation from*, it's also *salvation for*. We are saved *from* our old, broken ways of life, and we are saved *for* a vibrant life with God, as children in his royal family. Further, we're given the Holy Spirit, who brings about our adoption and testifies it's official. We can now cry out this phrase: "Abba Father."

God loves you—he's won you back, he's brought you in, he's crowned you with every bit of his inheritance, and he's filled you with his own Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14–17). Oh, and this Spirit—God himself dwelling in our hearts—is even still just a preview of something even better. The Spirit, Paul says, is an advance payment of the perfect communion we'll have in the new heavens and earth for all eternity (Eph. 1:13–14).

How on earth do we respond to all this? We should be overwhelmed with gratitude, praise, relief, and joy. We should live a new kind of life—the life not of an orphan or slave, but of a beloved child. We should look in the mirror every morning and recall the unimaginable: *God didn't need me. He wanted me. And he moved heaven and earth for me to be his child.*

## A Life of Belovedness

Galatians 4:6 says, “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘*Abba*, Father.’” Isn’t it interesting that both Galatians 4 and Romans 8 use the phrase, “*Abba* Father,” when talking about adoption?

*Abba* is an Aramaic word for “father.” For Jesus, it meant acceptance, relationship, and intimacy. *Abba* was so important to Jesus that his followers left it untranslated in their gospel narratives. There’s no other word quite like it.

Do you remember the most famous use of *Abba* coming from the heart of Jesus? It was in the garden of Gethsemane. On the night of his betrayal, just before his death, he led his disciples to this garden around midnight. He prayed and prayed, while his friends kept falling asleep.

Side note: How utterly *human* is it that at Jesus’s most vulnerable, painful moment, he just wanted his friends by his side? And—another side note—Jesus desperately wanted his friends to enter with him into his pain, but they weren’t ready. How often do we just want our spouse or friends or mentors to enter fully into our pain, yet they can’t? Surely some things are for us to carry alone into the garden, to learn to depend on the Father alone.

So Jesus is on his knees, alone, middle of the night, weeping, sweating blood. He prays, “*Abba* Father.” Rarely, or perhaps never, would any Hebrew teacher or theologian use *Abba* to speak to God. This, after all, was a simple word used by small children before advanced words were learned.

“*Abba*.” It is our first word in life, before our minds and bodies are fully developed. “*Abba*.” It may be our last word in life—as our bodies and minds fail us at last. Indeed, God is our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and end, but at both points and between, he is still our *Abba*.

## The Love of God Makes Us Radically Secure

When you know love of the Father on an *Abba* level, you are radically secure. You have probably met Christians like this. They live with a childlike faith and spirituality. Their natural posture looks like this:

### *Childlike Spirituality*

<i>Posture</i>	God is my Father, I am his beloved child.
<i>Default mode</i>	I love God and am freely loved by him.
<i>God's view of me</i>	God delights in me and sings over me. I trust that the eyes of the Lord are on his children.
<i>Toward others</i>	I focus on loving and serving others. I seek to show grace and restore others in a spirit of gentleness. I am open, teachable, grateful for growth opportunities, resilient.
<i>Present to others</i>	I am close, secure, capable of relational intimacy.
<i>Finds comfort</i>	I am safe in the Father's presence and love.
<i>Toward time</i>	I am rarely in a hurry; I work from rest.
<i>In the church</i>	I am content to be with Jesus and serve where needed; I see my brothers and sisters as family, not as threats or as burdens.
<i>Prayer</i>	I find prayer a joy and source of continual strength.
<i>Suffering</i>	I see hardship as an opportunity to learn to trust the Father more deeply.

As you look at this list, what are you drawn to? Do you believe this type of life is possible? Perhaps you knew this life once but have

lost it since. Whatever the case, you likely want this kind of life to be possible. If you're reading this book, you almost certainly long for a life of joy, strength, and intimacy with God.

So how do we get it? The only way to a life of childlike spirituality is to first get the love of God deep in our hearts.

There are a few types of videos that really get me, but none more than candid moments where a child discovers she's been adopted. Picture it: a foster child is sitting with her foster parents, and they give her a gift to open. She opens it up; it's framed paperwork. "What does it say?" she asks. It's an adoption certificate. "It says you belong to us now." The girl bursts into tears. She reaches for them, and they embrace her, and neither will let each other go.

This, my friends, is how we need to picture Christianity. It's not about following the rules. It's not about fitting into a group of people. It's not solely about justification by faith, or even repentance and conversion. After all, what are we saved *into* anyway? The family of God! Everything else flows downstream from being adopted by a gracious and compassionate Father.

The challenge, then, is believing this. The apostle Paul prayed that we might have all the spiritual strength of God—all the almighty, universe-creating, soul-redeeming, eternal power of God—for this one thing, to know the love of Christ (Eph. 3:14–21). It takes a mighty work of God to get his love deep within us. The greatest challenge in the Christian life is getting the love of the Father into our hearts. We might mentally assent to God's love. We might know all the verses and creeds affirming it. But are we really living in his love? Has the love of God become the air we breathe and the water we drink?

As Paul wrote in Romans 5:5, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

What a life-changing verse! The Father wants to *pour* his love into your heart through the Holy Spirit. Yet so many of us have not entered into the deep, abiding security of the love of God.

## Insecure Spirituality

There's an epidemic in our churches, and it seems to be true across evangelical, charismatic, mainline Protestant, and Catholic churches. Like most epidemics, it's invisible but widespread. It's an epidemic of insecurity. We believers are remarkably insecure. Before you take that as an insult, let me explain. It might just be the key to discovering a freshness, depth, and secure love you've never known before.

Insecurity is a state of life where we are not safe and sheltered in someone or something's strength and affection. Many places are quite unsafe: prison, an open body of water, middle school. And Christianity can also be a deeply insecure place; that is, if we haven't fully grasped the good news of our union with Christ and adoption.

This is the good news of Christianity: when we put our faith in Jesus, turning from our sins and following him, we are joined to him as one. The Father accepts the Son's death in our place—the payment for a penalty that our sin has created. We are restored to the Father; he forgives our sins and receives us into his vast and unending love. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, he welcomes us gladly and calls for a celebration. We become united to Jesus; so what's true of him is now true of us—we are accepted, we are children of God, we are heirs of his eternal kingdom. And what belongs to Jesus now belongs to us—we have right standing before God and we have inexhaustible spiritual riches. And further, as a seal and guarantee of all this (and our final, future salvation),

we receive the Holy Spirit, who is generously poured out into our hearts to indwell us with power and Christlike character. One day, Christ will return, the dead will be raised, we will be given perfect, resurrection bodies, all sin, brokenness, and death will be destroyed forever; and we will enjoy life with God for all eternity in a heavenly new creation.

Good news, right? So why then do so many of us struggle to grasp this remarkable life with God? Why do so many Christians believe in Jesus, get their salvation secured, and then go on living a generally unchanged life? Why are so many of us still so timid toward God and others? I believe it has to do with a limited understanding of God's love for us, a failure to fully grasp the beauty, power, and security that comes with being a beloved child of God.

Richard Lovelace, a church historian and theologian I have spent the past decade reading and re-reading, put it like this:

Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons—much less secure than non-Christians, because they have too much light to rest easily under the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have.<sup>5</sup>

Consider what Lovelace is saying. If we believe our standing before God depends on our spiritual achievements (that is, our obedience, our recent Bible reading, our service to the church, tithing, and so on), then we will be radically insecure. In fact, we will be more insecure than even non-Christians, whose conscience doesn't

continually convict them of sin and who aren't regularly reminded of their need of the gospel.

If this is true (and I believe it is), just think of the way it will shape our lives. A spirituality uncertain of God's love will always have to perform. It will always have to prove. It will always have to defend. It will always be scheming and striving, and it will never be at rest. An insecure spirituality is a brutal type of life.

## Insecure Spirituality Is Always Performing

In our church, we use the phrase “performative spirituality” to describe the default position of our hearts toward God and prayer. (I'm not exactly sure where this phrase originates, but I've heard it from New York City pastors Jon Tyson and John Starke. The charts you'll find below were actually inspired by something Jon Tyson presented in a sermon, and some of the language within the charts comes from him.<sup>6</sup>) Most simply, performative spirituality is performance-based religion. It's living to get God's approval and affection. It's an act to convince yourself you're becoming a better Christian and more useful to God and others.

Let me be clear: performative spirituality comes straight from the pit of hell. Nothing robs us of more joy. Nothing is more assured to give us either religious pride (if we're performing well) or spiritual despair (if we're performing poorly). Nothing is better at producing superficial, impersonal, and powerless prayers.

Why? Because the performance-based approach to Christianity puts us on a stage to earn God's acceptance and approval. That's the extent of our relationship with him. That's the best we get with this spiritual posture. It's an exhausting posture, and Scripture says nothing good of it. The biblical approach is this: we're not on a

stage, we're in a *relationship*. We're not performers, we're *children*. And God is not a harsh director or dissatisfied critic, he is our *Father*.

Have you been living by the wrong posture? Have you been prevented from receiving the embrace of the Father because you're too busy trying to impress him and others? Have you been held back from a deeper life with God by your own incessant need to strive, hide, and try every possible path of self-improvement?

And what about your church? Have your church members been hustling themselves to death instead of seeking to become deeply formed, wonderfully fruitful disciples of Jesus? Do you look around and see a preoccupation with superficial "three keys to a happy life" teaching, excellence in production (ahem, performance), and an avoidance of the deep and difficult aspects of Christian living—all for the sake of comfort and church growth?

What is the result of this? Millions of believers who read their Bibles, sort of pray, and go to church with decent regularity—and yet are simultaneously dry spiritually and unchanged in their Christlikeness. They may read of God's power and love every day. They may hear the gospel week after week. But none of it seems to make a practical difference. They are still insecure, day after day. Despite all they know and do, their natural posture in life looks like this:

### *Insecure Spirituality*

<i>Posture</i>	God is my boss, I am his servant; God is the critic, I am the performer.
<i>Default mode</i>	I'm on my own; nothing good happens unless I make it happen.
<i>God's view of me</i>	God wants me to do better; he's a bit disappointed, or he is distant and busy; he's not actively engaged in my life, or God is fine with things as long as I perform decently enough.
<i>Toward others</i>	I live to be seen by others, craving their approval. I greatly fear being exposed as a fraud. I tend to be critical, comparative, competitive, easily angered, easily hurt. I often see others as a threat or a burden.
<i>Present to others</i>	I am conditional and distant. I am always comparing—constantly aware of where I (and others) rank.
<i>Finds comfort</i>	I find comfort in busyness, addiction, distraction, and empty religious activity—whatever makes me look good or feel appreciated.
<i>Toward time</i>	I am typically in a hurry; I struggle to slow down and rest.
<i>In the church</i>	I seek positions of honor, power, and influence.
<i>Prayer</i>	My prayers are sporadic, scattered, and distracted. I often feel guilty: "I should pray more."
<i>Suffering</i>	I am non-resilient, unable to handle challenges and trials of life without bitterness. I view suffering as a sign that God is not with me or against me.

Unfortunately, this chart wasn't difficult for me to create. I am so familiar with the orphan's heart that it's still so regularly my default mode. I've been grinding all my life. I've been working and scheming and defending and protecting and projecting. Why? Because I assume everything depends on me. Even when I say otherwise, my actions and stress level suggest it. And from my years of pastoring, I know that I'm not alone in this struggle.

Further, I'm afraid many times we see this insecurity within us and yet continue to choose it. It's safer. It's worked for us so far. We subconsciously say, "Because of my insecure heart, I've got this great degree, this job, status in the world. I don't want to lose all that." What would happen if we actually set this insecure, performing lifestyle aside? I mean, the reason we hold on is because it *works* in a world teeming with other performance addicts. If we give up the praise and approval of others, will we survive?

Thankfully, Scripture gives us an answer. There's a case study in insecure, performative spirituality in the New Testament, and it's the Pharisees.<sup>7</sup> As Jesus says, everything they did was for others' praise: They loved to take the seats of honor, to be recognized and praised in public, and to be identified according to their social status (Matt. 23:5-7). They were outwardly impressive but inwardly corrupt (vv. 25-27). They drew near to wealth and despised the poor and needy (Luke 11:39-44). Even those who believed in Jesus did so privately, because they loved the praise of the crowds more than the approval of God (John 12:42-43). In short, they were hypocrites; they were play actors, putting a mask on and playing a part (Luke 12:1).

The Pharisees were a comparing, scheming, joyless bunch of religious leaders. But beneath it all, they were radically insecure. And their insecurity manifested in, as it always does, a low (and

even murderous) view of others and an unwillingness to accept those outside their tribe. Now, if we're honest, we should admit that this ancient religious group is essentially a natural extension of something that exists in each of us too. Living without God's fatherly love makes anyone—you, me, or a Pharisee—radically insecure, and from this insecurity, we feel the need to perform, prove ourselves, and defend ourselves. That's what they were doing. That's what all of us are doing apart from the safety and shelter of our Father's strength and affection.

As my mentor-friend Scotty Smith likes to say, "You can hear the lyric of the gospel and still not feel the music." This is what performative spirituality does best; it robs our lives of its rhythm and dance. But if we can identify and uproot this performance-based mentality, we can open ourselves to a deep, personal, and powerful life of prayer.

So the question is, do you want to live your whole life like a Pharisee? Or like a child? Consider the trajectory of your life and faith. How do you want to end up? Angry, moody, and murderous in heart? Always on the defense and proving yourself? Or would you rather operate out of a heart that is safe, stable, and open to the world? Able to laugh at misunderstandings instead of getting offended by them? Not having to prove yourself in every room? Free and secure.

Jesus offers you the choice.

Truth be told, there will always be people who resist the Father's loving embrace, and so the performance epidemic will likely exist in some degree till Christ returns. But for those of us who want out of that spiraling vortex of shame and death, we can do something about it now. If I remember anything from my infectious disease

studies in college, in an epidemic, we must notice common symptoms, identify the cause, and find a cure for the infection.

Lucky for us, we're two-thirds of the way through. We've already listed the common symptoms above (Insecure Spirituality list), and we've already identified the cause (Performance-Based living). What's left is to embrace the cure: putting off the orphan's heart and regaining our child's heart—one trained in receiving the love of our Father. Said another way, the cure is to release insecure spirituality and replace it with something much better. After all, the orphan's heart will never be satisfied. It's looking for its Father all along. Nothing else will do. Getting the love of the Father deep into our hearts is the only way.

## Releasing and Replacing Insecure Spirituality

At this point, we might see the presence of insecure spirituality in our hearts and turn to guilt and obedience. "Don't be insecure!" we tell ourselves. Sadly, many sermons and counseling sessions can do the same: "Stop worrying!" The subtle message we can turn to is just another version of performance-based religion—"Just try harder." But this is not a work of willpower; it's a gift of the Holy Spirit, one that we participate in by God's grace, releasing and replacing insecurity spirituality.

To help us do this in a practical way, let's compare the two charts we've seen so far. Side by side, we can see what insecure, performative spirituality looks like next to a childlike, secure spirituality that flows from the Father's love.

*Childlike Spirituality*

<i>Posture</i>	God is my Father, I am his beloved child.
<i>Default mode</i>	I love God and am freely loved by him.
<i>God's view of me</i>	God delights in me and sings over me.  I trust that the eyes of the Lord are on his children.
<i>Toward others</i>	I focus on loving and serving others.  I seek to show grace and restore others in a spirit of gentleness.  I am open, teachable, grateful for growth opportunities, resilient.
<i>Present to others</i>	I am close, secure, capable of relational intimacy.
<i>Finds comfort</i>	I am safe in the Father's presence and love.
<i>Toward time</i>	I am rarely in a hurry; I work from rest.
<i>In the church</i>	I am content to be with Jesus and serve where needed; I see my brothers and sisters as family, not as threats or as burdens.
<i>Prayer</i>	I find prayer a joy and source of continual strength.
<i>Suffering</i>	I see hardship as an opportunity to learn to trust the Father more deeply.

*Insecure Spirituality*

<i>Posture</i>	God is my boss, I am his servant; God is the critic, I am the performer.
<i>Default mode</i>	I'm on my own; nothing good happens unless I make it happen.
<i>God's view of me</i>	God wants me to do better; he's a bit disappointed, or He is distant and busy; he's not actively engaged in my life, or God is fine with things as long as I perform decently enough.
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<i>Suffering</i>	I am non-resilient, unable to handle challenges and trials of life without bitterness.  I view suffering as a sign that God is not with me or against me.

Looking at these charts, which one better represents you? Or better yet, where do you see yourself moving back and forth? If you're like me, you see a lot of uncomfortable evidence that an insecure, performative way of life has taken some root in you. So what are we to do?

We can release and replace. Release insecurity, and replace it with the Father's love. While it sounds too simple to be true, it is a pattern that will be fruitful over and over again as we walk in the childlike faith that Jesus commends.

In other words, another kind of life is available to us. Once we have identified the source of our insecurity, and traced how it shows up in a performance-based lifestyle, we'll be able to pull it up from the roots. This lie from the pit of hell can be dragged out into the light and left to suffocate and die in the light of God's love. And instead, a different type of life can take root in the good soil of Jesus's life. And once we've identified, broken, and released this insecure, performative spirituality, a confident new life of prayer can be opened to us.

Imagine you walk into the next member's meeting at your church—no, wait, let's say it's a well-attended prayer gathering. You step into a lobby full of people, and immediately you notice three of your friends chatting together. They just happen to be popular, "in crowd" leaders in the church. You wonder if it's safe to approach them, but suddenly wonder, *Am I good enough to join this group? Am I on their level? What if they turn away from me? Worse—what if they're talking about me already?!* As soon as you recognize that anxious, performance-minded, self-focused narrative start running in your mind, silently pray. Release it to the Father. Ask for his help. Now imagine you look across the room and see a person standing alone. You haven't met them before, and it seems like they might

not know anyone in the gathering. You have now released your anxious, performing feelings and are free to replace them with God's peace and a focus on others. You walk up and introduce yourself, make small talk, and then invite your new friend to come meet your three other friends. Congratulations: you've taken one more baby step in releasing anxious spirituality and replacing it with the love of the Father—for you and others.

## Praying from Belovedness

When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, remember, he began by teaching them how *not* to pray. Don't pray like the Pharisees; pray instead like little children. Don't pray from insecurity; pray from belovedness. Don't pray to get God's approval and affection; pray *from* God's approval and affection. Jesus is setting two postures before us. Our prayer lives depend on which posture we take, moment by moment, day after day.

The Scriptures often set before us two paths to evaluate side-by-side. We can build our house on the sand or on a solid foundation; we can take the broad path or the narrow one; we can remain in the darkness or live in the light. Moses's famous words in Deuteronomy 30—though they are primarily about following God's Word—form an appropriate secondary challenge to each of us as we compare insecure, performative spirituality with a secure, childlike spiritual life.

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose life*, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice,

and hold fast to him. (Deut. 30:19–20, emphasis added)

Jesus is doing nothing less than inviting us into the Father's embrace. He's challenging us to lay down our pride, self-sufficiency, and performative life. And he's inviting us to approach God as Father—a good and loving, ever-present, all-knowing and all-powerful Father. He has set before us a way of life and death. And he's compelling us, "Choose life!" See the destructive patterns of performative spirituality. See how weary and dry it makes you! See how the embrace of the Father gives you the deep security you've always wanted.

Again, Jesus offers you the choice.

## Remembering the Truth (and Praying It)

This is where we must begin our praying lives: God is our good and loving Father. He has done all the work to prepare our adoption. Jesus is our atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2). He was forsaken on the cross (Matt. 27:46) that we might be adopted. And now, he's also our big brother, intercessor, and advocate (Rom. 8:17, 29; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1). The Holy Spirit is God's abiding presence within us and our promise of future good (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 1:14). He brings about our adoption (Rom. 8:15–17). The Spirit takes our orphan's heart, aching to be welcomed in, and transforms it into the heart of a beloved child.

So now God is, in essence, saying to you: "I have all that I need. I don't need any slaves; I don't need servants; I don't need good, law-abiding citizens. What I *want* first and foremost is children."

Say it again: God is my Father. I am a child of God. His love is better than life.

Pray it now: God, you are my Father. Because of your Son's work, I am *already* your beloved child—I do not have to perform to become one. Your love is better than life. In you, I have everything I need.

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*Abba Father,  
We thank you and praise you  
that you have called us sons and daughters.  
Bring us now, Abba Father, into this beautiful reality more fully.  
I lay my insecure spirituality before you.  
I lay my performative mindset before you.  
Turn my orphan's heart into a beloved child's heart.  
Deepen your love in me;  
let it be the air I breathe.  
In Christ's name and power, amen and amen.*

## DO YOU FEEL LIKE EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON YOU?

That you must grind and hustle to have a flourishing life? If so, it's no surprise that stress, anxiety, and burdens may be weighing you down. It's also no surprise that you probably struggle to pray—or believe that prayer does much in your life.

**WHAT IF IT WASN'T ALL ON YOU?** What if God wanted to not only bear your burdens, but change you and work on your behalf as you engage with him and labor in ministry? In *Pour Out Your Heart*, pastor Jeremy Linneman reveals a deeper, more vibrant prayer life that could be yours. Where some thinkers approach prayer in a one-sided way, Linneman approaches prayer as both communion with God and an act of boldness that seeks God's transformative power to work mightily in our surrounding world. Through this book, you will:

- Rediscover your identity as a beloved child of the Father and learn to “pour out your heart like water” to him (Lam. 2:19)
- Develop a life of inner joy and peace through contemplative, childlike prayer
- Learn how to find fresh strength and faith for life's difficulties through bold, intercessory prayer
- Explore ancient prayer rhythms and resources that help you face life's challenges

We were *not* created to do life or ministry in our own strength. We *can* see the transformative power of God's presence at work, in our own lives and in our world. The way there is simple: we pour out our hearts in the presence of our loving, all-powerful Father, and he pours back his love and power into us.



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