



Understanding Prayer for the Dead

Its Foundation in History and Logic

JAMES B. GOULD

ΥΠΕΡ ΨΑΝΗΣ
ΤΗΣ ΔΟΥΛΟΥ
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Understanding Prayer for the Dead

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Understanding Prayer for the Dead

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James B. Gould

Foreword by
Jerry L. Walls



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Foreword

ONE OF THE MOST moving stories in the New Testament is that of Jairus, a synagogue leader who had a little daughter on the point of death, who came to Jesus and “repeatedly begged” him to lay his hands on her, and heal her. As Jesus was on his way to Jairus’s house, he was detained by a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for many years, and she too was desperate for healing. She managed just to touch his clothes, and when she did so, Jesus realized someone had been healed and stopped to find out who it was. While he was talking with her, messengers arrived from Jairus’s house with heartbreaking news: “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further” (Mark 5:35).

It is hard to imagine how devastating this must have been to this desperate father, whose hopes had been raised so high by the fact that Jesus was on the way to help. But then death intervened, and it seemed there was no reason to “trouble the teacher any further.”

This story illustrates what many Christians believe about prayer. On the one hand, prayer is an incomparable source of hope because it puts us in touch with a God of love for whom nothing is impossible. Even when things are humanly or naturally impossible, God can act to redeem things. On the other hand, many Christians believe that death puts a sudden stop to our prayers.

The reasons for thinking this, however, are not due to any notion that God is powerless in the face of death, as the messengers from Jairus’s house appeared to think. Rather, they come from another direction. In his final book, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, C. S. Lewis strongly affirmed his own belief in prayer for the dead, noting that at his age, many of the people he most loved were already dead, and he wonders how the rest of his prayers would survive if prayers for the dead were forbidden. “The action,” he writes, “is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only

the most compulsive case against it would deter me.” And there is the rub. Many Christians do believe there is a “compulsive theological case” that strictly forbids at least certain kinds of prayers for the dead.

In this two-volume work—the present book, *Understanding Prayer for the Dead*, and its successor, *Practicing Prayer for the Dead*—James B. Gould argues powerfully not only that there is no good theological case against prayer for the dead, but also that there is a powerful theological case *in favor* of it. Gould’s case is wide ranging in its argument, and he deals with the history of prayer for the dead in Christian theology as well as the philosophical and theological issues raised by the practice. His work will be recognized as a landmark on these vital issues for years to come.

The author distinguishes four kinds of prayers for the dead, and notes that the main Christian traditions have differed on the matter of which of these kinds of prayer are appropriate. The four kinds of prayer are for consummation, growth, purification, and salvation. While the first kind of prayer is most widely accepted and practiced, by many Protestants as well as Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, the second and third types of prayer are accepted less commonly by Protestants, but are practiced by the Orthodox and Catholics. However, the fourth kind of prayer, for salvation, is generally rejected by all three traditions, on the ground that postmortem repentance and salvation are impossible.

Gould’s ambitious project in these two volumes is to persuade Christians of all three traditions to embrace a more expansive theology of prayer for the dead than their official theology endorses. In short, he argues that there are good theological reasons to embrace all four kinds of prayer for the dead, and this requires Catholics to modify their views, as well as Protestants and Evangelicals.

As a Protestant who has written a book defending a doctrine of purgatory, including postmortem repentance, I am both intrigued by Gould’s argument as well as attracted to it. Indeed, the early Christian practice of prayer for the dead, particularly prayer for purification, was one of the factors that led to the eventual development of the doctrine of purgatory. The traditional doctrine of purgatory however, pertains only to persons who die in a state of grace, so postmortem salvation is excluded.

Part of Gould’s theological rationale for salvation prayer for the dead is his belief in universalism. His embrace of universalism is part of his transition from the views he held growing up as the son of missionaries in Nigeria, where he was taught that only those who heard the

FOREWORD

gospel in this life could be saved. While I reject universalism, it is worth noting that there are still good reasons to affirm postmortem conversion for persons who have not heard the gospel in this life, or who have not decisively rejected it. So the rationale for salvation prayers for the dead does not depend on the assumption of universalism—a point Gould himself acknowledges.

One of the most compelling aspects of these books is the case the author makes for the spiritually enriching power of a more expansive view of prayer, a case he develops in detail in the second volume. While theological truth is not determined by devotional practice, it is often shaped and informed by it.

These books are a challenge to rethink a fascinating and existentially engaging set of philosophical and theological issues, as well a warm invitation to enrich our relationship with God and the human community, whether living or dead. And as Jairus and his friends learned, death may not be the insurmountable barrier we think it is.

Jerry L. Walls
Professor of Philosophy
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INTRODUCTION

WE WERE STANDING IN the church's fellowship hall. "I'm puzzled," Larry said, "about this morning's Prayers of the People." "How so?" I asked, sipping coffee. "You see"—he stopped to remember, then continued—"we made this petition: 'we commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled.'" "Yes . . ."—I waited. "Well—why do we do that? Why do we pray for the dead *at all*? And why do we pray for *all* the dead?" C. S. Lewis, I reminded Larry, had the same question. He admits praying for the departed, but wonders why—since tradition teaches that at death a person's salvation or damnation is final.¹ That conversation led to this project.

In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem reports having heard believers ask "what is a soul, leaving this world . . . , profited by being remembered in the prayer?"² In this work I answer his question, explaining and defending the practice of *petitionary* prayer for *all* the dead. I discuss one general prayer—*consummation prayer* concerns all the departed and asks for completion of God's plan, their resurrection in a new heaven and earth. And since the dead comprise three groups, I discuss three specific forms of prayer—*growth prayer* concerns the blessed in heaven and asks for their increasing participation in God's life, *purification prayer* concerns the imperfect in purgatory and asks for their moral transformation in love, and *salvation prayer* concerns the unsaved in hell and asks for their restored relationship with God. My thesis challenges Protestants, who seldom pray for the dead, to begin doing so—and Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, who pray only for the Christian dead, to broaden their practice to include *all* departed persons. I argue that prayer for all the dead is part and parcel of an orthodox understanding of

1. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, Letter 20, 107.

2. Cyril of Jerusalem, cited in Swete, "Prayer for Departed," 510.

salvation—one aspect of the web of doctrine including Trinity, creation, redemption, and eschatology. Petitions for consummation, growth, purification, and salvation are not inconsequential. Instead, they raise the most basic of all questions and go to the center of God’s purpose in creating spiritual beings and redeeming sinful humankind. In this project I “read theology backwards”—to use Hugh Mackintosh’s phrase—since in the last things, the conclusion of God’s work begun in creation, “we find the truest index of the whole.”³ Prayer for the dead, because it illuminates and is illuminated by central themes of faith, is an excellent vantage point for seeing all of theology.

The Autobiography Behind This Project

The personal is philosophical—all reflective thinking is autobiographical, reflecting a person’s dominant concerns and life narrative. This is certainly the case for me. The conservative Protestant subculture in which I grew up was framed by the afterlife: faith was about getting to heaven and the threat of hell was always present. My journey of thinking about the nature of salvation began much earlier than my conversation with Larry.

I experienced a fascinating childhood in Nigeria, where my parents served for many years as missionaries. A major motivation for their work was a belief in exclusive salvation—that in order to be saved a person must hear the gospel and believe in Christ. As a teenager I wondered how two ideas I was taught—that Jesus loves everyone and that those who do not believe in him go to hell—fit together. In college I became a Calvinist, partly to get answers.⁴ Because salvation is not a deserved right but a free gift, God can in perfect fairness give grace to some but not others—saving and damning whomever God chooses. Eventually, however, my Calvinism collapsed. I kept finding Bible verses that indicate that God’s love is indiscriminate (2 Pet 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4)—and I simply could not get

3. Mackintosh, cited in Robinson, *In the End, God*, 42.

4. There is great diversity in Calvinism (or, in Roman Catholic theology, Augustinianism). The particular version to which I was drawn is evangelical Calvinism that emphasizes predestination (see Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 4) and divine sovereignty—as expressed by historical theologians such as Charles Spurgeon, A. A. Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, and contemporary writers like J. I. Packer, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul. Calvinism of this type states that while God’s *providential* love is universal, God’s *saving* love is particular; it is restricted to the elect whom God purposed to save and for whom Christ died.

INTRODUCTION

past the moral injustice of double predestination and exclusive salvation.⁵ The logic became obvious to me—since God truly loves everyone and wants them to be saved, exclusivism cannot be true—and I became an inclusivist.⁶ Believing the gospel is not possible for the unevangelized, and so salvation—while objectively based on Christ’s death and resurrection—does not require subjective knowledge of and conscious faith in Christ.⁷ I am now a universalist. I accept the biblical depiction of a final triumph in which all things and people are reconciled to God (Col 1:16, 20)—and believe death is not a point-of-no-return beyond which all chance for reconciliation with God ends.

5. Arminianism (or, in Roman Catholic theology, Non-Augustinianism) affirms that, while God initiates salvation, human beings can and must cooperate with and respond to divine grace in order to be saved. Arminian exclusivism—the idea that God saves those who freely choose to believe in Christ and damns those who do not—fares no better morally than Calvinism. A decision for or against God must be informed—but the unevangelized are not informed and so cannot accept or reject faith in Christ. They are damned by luck of circumstance, through no fault of their own.

6. My experience during this time was spiritually and psychologically difficult. I felt too ashamed to share my conclusions with my parents because the beliefs that so troubled me were the very reason they went to Africa. To question, let alone reject, these beliefs was to betray them, to invalidate the core principle of their lives. I did not want to give them pain, and so I suffered in silence. To make a long story short, I eventually found a progressive church where the limitless love of God and amazing grace beyond measure were affirmed. When I did finally broach the topic with my parents, they were generous and open. We have discussed these issues many times since; my mother has told me that she and my father themselves wondered about exclusive salvation since—as Rob Bell (*Love Wins*, 8) puts it—what if they got a flat tire and people in the next village never heard about Jesus? A loving God would not make their eternal destiny rest on chance, on being in the right place at the right time.

7. Technically, exclusivism claims that salvation requires a person to 1. consciously believe in Christ 2. in this life—that is, before they die. This generates two forms of inclusivism. *Eschatological evangelism inclusivism* denies condition 2. If salvation is found only through hearing and believing the gospel, and if God truly offers salvation to all persons, and if some do not hear the gospel now—then they must hear later. Either at or after death all individuals are given knowledge of Christ that is adequate for saving belief. *Implicit faith inclusivism* denies condition 1. Explicit belief in the gospel is not necessary for salvation. It is subjective faith (a positive response to God in the heart as shown by sincere moral action and religious devotion) rather than objective knowledge (specific information believed about God in the head) that saves. The Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* Chapter 16) authoritatively rejects the traditional view that “outside the Church no salvation”; instead, those who Karl Rahner describes as “anonymous Christians”—the unevangelized who seek God with a sincere heart—may be saved. See my “Broad Inclusive Salvation” and Sanders, *No Other Name*.

While I was I morally troubled by hell as a child, in graduate school I became bothered by heaven—particularly the atheist accusation that Christianity is otherworldly. Religion, Karl Marx says, “is the opium of the people”—the promise of heaven is a drug that paralyzes political energy and diverts us from struggling for a just world here and now.⁸ Having been raised as an evangelical, I thought in dualistic and otherworldly terms. Dualism divides reality into two categories—sacred and secular—and otherworldliness regards the spiritual realm (especially future heaven) as more important than this life. I knew, though, that the atheists were right, that this world matters—in Nigeria I had seen and lamented preventable poverty, illness, and hunger. I read Reformed scholars who draw on the doctrines of creation and the cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) to ground Christian involvement in public affairs and social action. Most important, I discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “worldly Christianity”—his prophetic call for the church to embrace its earthly responsibilities as “salt” and “light” (Matt 5:13–16), to no longer “think in two spheres” because Jesus Christ, the God-human, unites the supernatural and the natural.⁹ Jesus’ life of compassion—his physical healings and table fellowship with outcasts—call a church that follows him to involvement in medical care and education, to work for justice in world trade, and to free vulnerable people from oppression and abuse. For many of their years in Africa my parents were involved in leprosy work.

This, in brief, is the autobiography behind my theology. Many readers, I suspect, have had similar journeys. The life of faith is just that—a journey—and faith that seeks understanding is likely to change in the process. “The habits of faith that served us well at earlier stages may not survive untouched,” Rowan Williams says. “There is a necessary movement of faith beyond the images we have found comforting in the past. To cling to those pictures is to refuse growth.”¹⁰ In Lewis’ *Prince Caspian*, Lucy, the child of faith, meets Aslan again for the first time since *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

8. Marx, *Early Writings*, 44.

9. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, chapter 1 and *Letters and Papers*. I discuss these themes in “Bonhoeffer and False Dilemma.”

10. Williams, *Lion’s World*, 122–23.

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”¹¹

Like Lucy, I have had to unlearn some false ideas and learn some true ideas concerning God—but I am convinced I now understand God better. Critical reflection has given my faith greater integrity and credibility; it has deepened, not destroyed, my relationship with God.¹²

The Method and Plan of This Project

The Second Vatican Council calls for “elements [of faith and practice] which have suffered injury through accidents of history . . . to be restored to the vigor which they had in the days of the holy Fathers.”¹³ Prayer for the dead no longer has the prominence it once did, Robert Eno points out, even in Roman Catholic thought and piety—and now is the time to articulate the practice in a new way. “But theological reconstruction,” he observes, “must begin with a knowledge of the foundations.”¹⁴ Knowing what we are doing when we pray for the departed requires developing—in some detail, at least—eschatological doctrines of the last things (from the Greek word *eschaton*, “that which comes last”): death, judgment, heaven, purgatory, and hell. Eschatology shapes all of theology. As Jürgen Moltmann says, eschatology “is not just one element of Christianity, but . . . is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything else is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.”¹⁵ Eschatology determines our understanding of prayer for the dead. In order to pray for the final consummation of history we must accept a two-stage afterlife in which the last things—resurrection, for example—do not occur immediately at death. In order to pray for the growth of those in heaven we must assume a dynamic experience of union with God. In order to pray for the purification of those in purgatory we must understand that heaven requires perfect holiness—and why

11. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 141.

12. This paraphrases Mordecai Kaplan, cited in Felten and Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions*, xi.

13. Vatican II, cited in Witvliet, “Embodying Wisdom of Ancient Liturgical Practices,” 196.

14. Eno, “Fathers and Cleansing Fire,” 184.

15. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16. Polkinghorne (*God of Hope*, 140) agrees: “eschatology is . . . the keystone of the edifice of theological thinking, holding the whole building together.”

it is developed progressively rather than bestowed instantly at death. In order to pray for the salvation of those in hell we must believe that death is open and posthumous repentance possible. These necessary assumptions require analysis and defense. We are more likely to reach clear and justified conclusions about prayer for the dead if we start with a firm theoretical base.¹⁶

My account of prayer for the dead is *prescriptive* (it defines what we *ought* to mean), not *descriptive* (it does not aim to capture what people actually do think they are doing when they make such prayers). My argument is *orthodox*. My conclusions are revisionary in some ways, but my theological premises are conservative, drawing on basic doctrines—Trinity, creation, and salvation—that the historic churches and great theologians have held as fundamental to Christianity and that are common to all orthodox believers.¹⁷ My position is *ecumenical*. I cite theologians of all persuasions to make a case for petitionary prayer for all of the departed that should be acceptable to all branches of the church. This project may appeal particularly to those in the emerging and ancient-future church who are attempting to move into the future through continuity with the past, to recover traditional wisdom of early church theology, spirituality and liturgy in a catholicity that crosses denominational lines.¹⁸ I do draw, however, on the tradition of my own church—the Episcopal Church, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Finally, my analysis is *integrative*—it endeavors to discern the truth, as an Episcopal Church statement says, “through engaging the Bible, . . . the historic teachings and liturgy of the Church, and human reason.”¹⁹ Prayer for the dead involves complex and controversial issues—exegetical, theological, and philosophical. In addressing them I engage a range of academic disciplines and attempt to be biblically accurate, historically informed, and philosophically reasoned. Praying for the departed implies a wide range of theological topics and a large scope of practical concern—a vision of space and time, good and evil, creation, salvation, and final redemption. In addition, it engages

16. See the methodology outlined in Swinburne, *Christian God*, 3.

17. I draw this language from Kronen and Reitan, *God's Final Victory*, 2.

18. This trend of recovering ancient wisdom for the modern church was initiated by mid-twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians. In post-Christian Europe these *ressourcement* theologians turned to the work of the great patristic and medieval theologians for revitalization. See Husbands, “Introduction,” 10–12.

19. Episcopal Church, “Episcopal Faith.”

almost all philosophical questions—mind-body, personal identity, free-will and determinism, time and eternity.

In this project I do not try to consider every issue or answer every possible objection; I sacrifice details for brevity and accessibility. While I have tried to balance logic and practice, some readers will want more philosophical analysis and others will want more practical application. I develop few new positions on prayer, heaven, purgatory, or hell; there is an enormous literature on each of the questions I discuss, and interested readers will find resources in the footnotes. My unique contribution is to summarize and synthesize what others have written, assembling from established positions an explanation of prayer for the dead—hence this project is packed with quotes. I do not defend belief in life after death. Instead, I take it for granted that if Christianity is true then life after death is also true. Frederick Buechner says it simply: “if I were God and loved the people I created . . . I couldn’t imagine consigning them to oblivion when their time came.”²⁰ William Hasker puts it more formally: “there is a close tie between theism and belief in an afterlife.” We should “consider the two beliefs together as a package” so that “arguments for . . . theism [count] as arguments for . . . an afterlife.” Life after death is a function and consequence of belief in God; others have done the work of defending the idea that we survive death.²¹

Finally, a caution about terminology. The words used for the three afterlife destinies—“heaven,” “purgatory,” and “hell”—are emotionally-charged terms that carry common meanings with all sorts of connotations. The popular conceptions are that *heaven* is an immaterial place where spirits float around on clouds, that *purgatory* is souls writhing in pain while demons screech around them, and that *hell* is an eternal and fiery torture chamber. I do not understand or use the words in these ways. It would be preferable, perhaps, to have new terms to mark the difference

20. Buechner, *Eyes of Heart*, 16. Robinson (*In the End, God*, 91) agrees: God “cannot, being eternal love, cease ever to hold [human persons] dear, nor consent to scrap them after three score years and ten.” If God made human beings for relationship with God then it would be illogical to let them pass out of existence at death. If Christian theism is true, then human beings are made by a God who loves them and whose purpose for them includes life after death.

21. Hasker, “Afterlife,” Section 5. For defenses of survival see Hasker’s bibliography. Also see Davis, *After We Die*, as well as older works such as Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?*, Penelhum, *Immortality*, and Perrett, *Death and Immortality*. More skeptical volumes include Edwards, *Immortality* and Moore, *Philosophical Possibilities Beyond Death*.

between traditional and revised meanings—but it seems we are stuck with the usual words as convenient labels. Lexical definitions convey how a term is commonly used. Stipulated definitions, by contrast, give a specific—and sometimes different—meaning to a term for a particular purpose. I use the traditional words with the following stipulated meanings, meanings on which I elaborate later. *Heaven* is being in the presence of God. It includes both *present heaven* (the transitional place where we go when we die and where we await resurrection) and *future heaven* (the permanent place on a renewed earth where we will live forever with God and each other). *Purgatory* is the place, a lower part of heaven, where we mature into the love that prepares us for full union with God, the higher part of heaven. *Hell* is a place of separation from God. While hell is real, it is escapable—individuals can leave when they repent and turn to God; in the end, hell will exist but will be empty—like an abandoned warehouse. Readers should not dismiss what follows simply because I use traditional words like “hell.” While they can miscommunicate—readers might immediately think of eternal torture, for example—inventing a novel vocabulary also carries risk. Nor should readers dismiss what follows because I use old words in new ways. Instead, I ask you to join me in the—at times hard—work of rethinking some key concepts and received ideas.

This project consists of two volumes, sequenced as follows. The first considers the history and logic of prayer for the dead. Chapter 1 addresses the biblical credentials of such prayers. Chapters 2 through 4 provide a historical and contemporary overview—and state my thesis. Chapters 5 through 7 identify the logical assumptions of prayer for the dead: the effectiveness of prayer—and the conscious, personal, and temporal nature of the life to come. These chapters are the most philosophically challenging. Chapter 8 outlines a theological framework—creative love theism—that grounds our prayers. Prayers for the departed are prayers of hope—and chapter 9 analyzes the nature of hope. The first volume makes a case for prayer for the dead in general.

The second volume concerns the practice and value of prayer for the dead. Chapter 1 briefly restates the philosophical and theological assumptions of volume one. Chapters 2 through 5 make a case for the four specific types of prayer for the dead. They discuss the substance of prayer for final consummation of all things, growth of the blessed in heaven, purification of the imperfect in purgatory, and salvation of the unsaved in hell—identifying the necessary conception of the afterlife required by

each particular prayer. Chapters 6 and 7 reflect on the spiritual value of prayer for the departed—how it enhances faith, builds hope, and sharpens discipleship. Chapter 8 provides sample prayers that may be used both liturgically and devotionally. In each volume an Appendix includes detailed theoretical considerations.

Concluding Remarks

One morning at breakfast Larry and I were discussing a draft of chapter 6, which he had read. Suddenly I began laughing at my own presumption in thinking that my speculations truly represent eschatological reality. It reminded me of lines from Lewis' "Apologist's Evening Prayer": "*thoughts are but coins. / Let me not trust, instead of thee / their thin-worn image of thy head.*"²² My own amusement at supposing I understand the details of what happens after death, which we *do not* know, reminded Larry and me of what we *do* know—that we are made by a God whose overwhelming love surrounds us always, that we are called to friendship with that God, and that this destiny will be fulfilled eternally in a life beyond this life.

Ideas are created in community—and my thoughts in this book have been discussed, debated, refined, and corrected through conversation with trusted companions: my dear sister Beth Nolson (a kindred questioning spirit in whose home and heart I have always been welcomed and sheltered), my teaching colleagues Timothy Linehan (my philosophical sounding board, whose fine knowledge of metaphysics and epistemology helped me navigate some tricky waters), and James Campbell (who schooled me in the ways of Eastern Orthodoxy)—and my friend Larry Wild (who, as head librarian at Judson University in Elgin, Illinois, functioned as *de facto* research assistant tracking down numerous sources for me). Mary Jane Deja of McHenry County College was tireless in ordering and delivering inter-library loan material, even the most obscure. I am indebted to my editor, Robin Parry, for his consistent encouragement and insightful ideas. Above all, I am grateful to my wife Jenna Korenstra—living with her is a delightful foretaste of heaven and a school of virtue. She has been to me—in the words of our wedding prayer—"a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, a companion in

22. Lewis, *Poems*, 129. Also see *Mere Christianity*, 135–36.

joy.” She is an unmistakable sign to me, as to all who know her, of God’s generous love which always offers second chances.²³

Some of the material in this volume first appeared (in modified form) in previous publications of mine. Specifically, I have drawn material from the following articles:

“Broad Inclusive Salvation: The Logic of ‘Anonymous Christianity.’”

Philosophy and Theology 20 (2008) 175–98.

“God’s Saving Purpose and Prayer for All the Departed.” *Journal of*

Anglican Studies 10 (2012) 1–29.

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.²⁴ Scripture marked NIV is taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*.²⁵ Passages from the Apocrypha are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*.²⁶ Scripture marked KJV is taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

When I quote authors who refer to God using masculine terms, I change these to the gender-neutral word “God.” I leave masculine biblical quotations unchanged.

23. Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer*, 429.

24. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

25. International Bible Society, 1984.

26. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

chapter 1

SETTING A CONTEXT

The Bible and Prayer for the Dead

SITTING ON THE DECK on a warm summer day, swatting mosquitoes as we drink iced tea, the conversation drifts to my research and writing. My conservative Protestant friends quiz me on the biblical justification of praying for the dead—let alone all the dead. “Where do you get that from the Bible?” one asks. “Doesn’t Scripture contradict the idea that people who reject God in this life get a second chance after death?” inquires another. In some respects the discussion is friendly and open, but in other ways their questions are skeptical, almost dismissive. Their concern is a legitimate one. The Bible, David Crump says, must take priority “in establishing the proper parameters of Christian theology.”¹ As Christians we live under God’s Word—and we become anxious and defensive when Scripture is interpreted in ways that are new to us. So how *does* praying for the dead fit with the Bible?

Scripture and Prayer for the Departed

There is no example, command, or prohibition of prayer for the dead in Scripture. The Bible does forbid attempts to communicate *with* the dead (Lev 19:31; 20:6)—but this is irrelevant to prayer *for* them. The few texts appealed to in support of the practice are difficult to interpret and cannot serve as simple proof texts.

1. Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, 281.

2 *Maccabees* 12:39–45. During the second-century-BCE war for Jewish independence from the imposition of Greek culture on Israel, Judas Maccabeus, while collecting the bodies of fallen comrades, found pagan emblems—forbidden by Jewish law—under their tunics. He immediately “turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out.” The writer endorses Judas’ behavior: “in doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. . . . He made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.” This text clearly describes prayer for the departed, but there are two problems with it. First, while Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox accept this deuterocanonical book as revealed Scripture, Protestants do not. Second, interpretations of the story differ. Some scholars see it as evidence that prayer for the dead was a common practice in Palestinian Judaism (and thus part of Jesus’ synagogue worship experience), while others see it as a single episode not repeated elsewhere. Given the difficulties with this text, we should be hesitant in using it to support prayer for the dead.

2 *Timothy* 1:16–18. In the opening greetings of the second letter to Timothy, St. Paul prays for God to bless an old friend: “may the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, . . . may the Lord grant that he will find mercy . . . on that day.” Scholarly opinion is divided on whether Onesiphorus was dead or alive. The fact that other people—Prisca and Aquila—are greeted personally while only the “household” of Onesiphorus is mentioned suggests that he was dead.² Some, however, point out that since it is not directly stated, we cannot be certain that Onesiphorus was dead. Perhaps he had deserted the faith, which is why he is not addressed personally and why God is asked to show him mercy at judgment. This text most likely indicates prayer for a dead person, but may not.

1 *Corinthians* 15:29. In defending resurrection, St. Paul makes this enigmatic remark: if there is no resurrection “what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” Baptism for the dead is illogical if there is no resurrection.³ Most modern scholars see here a reference to substitutionary baptism of living people for the sake of some-

2. This interpretation is accepted by many scholars, including conservative Protestants such as Kelly, *Commentary on Pastoral Epistles*, 171 and Saarinen, *Pastoral Epistles*, 133–34.

3. See Reaume, “Another Look,” 466.

one dead—an unbaptized catechumen or non-believer, for example. The natural reading of the text is that actions of the living can help the dead. There are, however, difficulties with this view. First, there is no historical parallel before or during St. Paul’s time of baptism for the dead; this single reference might be due to the religious environment at Corinth, which had a unique preoccupation with the dead and the underworld.⁴ Second, this practice contradicts St. Paul’s teaching on the participatory nature of baptism; one person’s baptism cannot substitute for someone else, and baptism alone without personal faith cannot save. Some scholars see the text as referring to unbelievers who decided to become believers and be baptized due to the influence of deceased Christians—in which case it does not concern the dead at all.⁵ Because of the uncertain meaning of this text, it cannot bear much weight as biblical evidence for the idea that the actions of living people—including prayer—can affect the fate of the dead.

The Irrelevance of the Silence of Scripture

These few texts give no clear guidance for or against praying for the dead. Determining what the silence of Scripture means depends on a person’s theological method. Some take this silence as definitive: since the Bible encourages prayer for the living but does not mention prayer for the dead—especially when it would be natural to expect it—it is not appropriate. The Thessalonian believers, for example, worried about the fate of those who had died before the second coming of Christ—but St. Paul does not comfort them by encouraging prayer for their dead (1 Thess 4:13–18).⁶ The Reformation principle *sola Scriptura* declares that the Bible is the only true source of knowledge, the final authority which safeguards the church from false teaching. Thomas Boulton claims that “the silence of Scripture is conclusive. It would be simply impossible for the writers of the Epistles to have omitted directions about prayers for the dead . . . if these had been any part of their system.”⁷ The Bible’s lack of attention to prayer for the dead constitutes, some believe, a prohibition.

4. See DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion.”

5. See White, “Recent Challenges” and “Baptized on Account of Dead.”

6. Archbishops’ Commission, *Prayer and Departed*, 39.

7. Boulton, cited in Archbishops’ Commission, *Prayer and Departed*, 86.

Other scholars see this silence as due to the early Christian setting. The ancient church expected Christ's imminent return and therefore did not develop its theology of the afterlife. St. Paul, for example, does not tell the Thessalonians to pray for their departed because there was simply no need for them to do so. What they needed was reassurance—which he gives—that the dead are not in danger of missing Christ's return but will be resurrected and share in his victory. Furthermore, Scripture is not an exclusive norm for faith and practice—reason and tradition also play a role. As Jerry Walls says, the fact that something is not mentioned in the Bible “hardly means that there is no way to argue the matter theologically or to arrive at a biblically-grounded view on the issue. For the question remains whether the doctrine coheres with things that are clearly taught in Scripture, or can even be inferred from them as a reasonable theological conclusion.”⁸ Certain beliefs, Crump suggests, are *biblically necessary*—basic truths directly taught in Scripture and drawn from exegesis. But since the Bible does not provide complete answers to many questions, we must go beyond what it says and develop positions that are *philosophically possible*—derived truths inferred from biblical teaching and systematized by rational reflection.⁹ Many doctrines (such as the Trinity) and practices (like infant baptism) are not mentioned in Scripture, but are later theological developments. In praying for the dead, William Forbes says, the ancient church, far from ignoring the Bible, was “led . . . by the testimonies and examples of Scripture, from which it is evident that the prayers which just men offer for others are of great avail with God, and . . . that the righteous at their death do not cease to be.”¹⁰ Doctrines and practices that go beyond what the Bible says are legitimate, David Chapman concludes, “provided always that such development in no way contradicts Scripture and remains congruent with other doctrines.”¹¹ For

8. Walls, *Purgatory*, 56.

9. Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 18. MacDonald (*Evangelical Universalist*, 36) outlines several ways in which beliefs can be based on the Bible. First, a doctrine has positive biblical support if 1. it is explicitly taught (in a plain “proof text,” for example), 2. it can be reasonably inferred from what is explicitly taught, or 3. it is consistent with the broader biblical meta-narrative. Second—and more controversially—a doctrine may be believed if it does not conflict with what is explicitly taught in Scripture.

10. Forbes, cited in Archbishops' Commission, *Prayer and Departed*, 77–78.

11. Chapman, “Rest and Light Perpetual,” 43. It is not necessary for all matters of faith and practice to be contained in the Bible—but they must not contradict it. There are doctrines which are clearly taught in Scripture and those that are in harmony with (and thus allowed by) Scripture.