

# A Pattern of Prayer

by Alexander Maclaren

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*Alexander Maclaren's sermon explores the depth and significance of earnest prayer, emphasizing the importance of invoking God's names and the nature of petitions and pleas in our communication with Him.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 86:1, Matthew 6:7

**Topics:** "The Power of Prayer", "Trusting in God's Character"

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## Description

Alexander Maclaren emphasizes the significance of earnest prayer, contrasting it with vain repetition. He illustrates that true prayer arises from a deep sense of need and faith, as exemplified in Psalms 86:1-5, where the psalmist persistently calls upon God using various names that reflect His character. Maclaren encourages believers to approach God with their necessities, trusting in His mercy and character, and to expect joy and gladness as a result of their prayers. He highlights that the essence of prayer lies not in the formality of words but in the heartfelt connection to God, who is always ready to respond to those who earnestly seek Him.

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## Transcript

WHEN YE PRAY, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do" --Matthew 6:7. But earnest reiteration is not vain repetition. The second is born of doubt; the first, of faith. The prayer that springs from a deep felt need, and will not cease till that need is supplied, may say the same things over a hundred times and yet they shall not be vain. Rather, as the same blood is repeatedly driven through the veins by the contraction and dilating of the heart, so all true prayer will flow forth over and over again as the spirit opens in yearning and closes itself in calm fruition on the grace it has received and then dilates again in longing and sense of need. So the Master, who warned us against empty repetitions, enjoined upon us the persistent prayer which prevails; and of Himself it is written, "And he left them and went away again the third time, saying the same words" (Matthew 26:44).

This faithful and prevailing reiteration remarkably characterizes the striking series of supplications in the text, Psalm 86:1-5. Substantially they are all one, but the varying phases of the one wish show how familiar it was in all its aspects to his mind, and the accumulation of them is the token of his earnest longing and profound sense of need. Like the great ancestor of his nation, Jacob, he wrestles with God and prevails.

The psalm has quotations from earlier songs-especially David's. In all probability, then, we have here a devout man in later ages, breathing out his cries to God and using, as we do, consecrated words of earlier

Scripture, which he freely reproduces and blends with his own petitions. That is no sign of cold artificial prayer, any more than our petitions are to be so regarded because they often flow naturally in Bible words which are hallowed by many associations. Rather, in using them, we unite our poor lives with those of the saints of old who "cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses" (Psalm 107:13).

The fulness and variety of these petitions deserve careful consideration. My object now is mainly to bring out the richness of meaning which lies in them. Note the invocations, the petitions, and the pleas.

### Calling on God

Is any part of our prayers, more formal, mechanical, unmeaning than our repetition of the name of Him to whom we speak? We round off sentences with it. We make beginnings of our prayers with it; we finish them conventionally, and properly, as we think, with it; but if we rightly understand the meaning of that element of the prayer which the old divines in their catechisms called an invocation, we shall understand that it is the foundation of all and that it professes very distinctly a faith which is anything but formal.

For when we call upon the name of God, if we do it correctly and come not under the condemnation of that commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain"- what do we mean? What do we do thereby? Three things. We summon up before our thoughts that aspect of the divine character which lies in the name that we utter. We do not pronounce a mere syllable. We utter a significant word that tells us something concerning God, and when we use it, unless the majestic image which it is intended to flash into our mind does indeed sparkle and glow there, it would be better for us to be speaking in an unknown tongue than to have an unfruitful understanding.

Further, we profess that we are exercising an act of faith in the character as revealed in that name. We say in effect: "This aspect of thy divine all-sufficiency, this fragment of shine ineffable perfection, on this I build, and to this I make my appeal." Further, we bring before God His own character as a motive with Him. We say in effect: "I bring thee myself, and in that mighty name, for the sake of what it declares, I ask that these goods may be bestowed upon me." So, to call on God is to contemplate His character, to trust in that character which we contemplate, and to believe that He responds to the obligations that are involved therein.

If the foregoing then is the general idea of calling on God, we may now advance to notice how comprehensive and various are the names by which the psalmist calls upon his helper, God, and steadies his own confidence.

In general, this Psalm is remarkable for its frequent use of the divine names. In almost every verse they recur, and their frequency gives us a vivid impression of earnestness, of consciousness of need, and of faith so sore pressed that it could only sustain itself by perpetual renewal of its grasp of God. Five times in these verses of our text does he call on Him, and that by three different names--Jehovah, My God, Lord. These three sacred names have each a distinct meaning when used in prayer; they bring up aspects of the character of God as the basis of our confidence and the ground of our petitions.

He calls on Jehovah. As to that first name, let me remind you in the briefest possible way that it has a double force in Scripture--one derived from its literal, philological meaning, the other derived from its historical use and development. As concerns the former of these two, as we all know, I suppose, the word substantially implies eternal, timeless being, underived self-existence. His name is, "I am that I am," He

who is and was and shall be, the one fontal source of all transitory and creatural life, who "himself unmoved moveth all things."

And, then, the name derives a force from the history of its origin in and use. It was given as the seal of the covenant, as the ground of the great deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The national existence rested upon it. The vitality of Israel was guaranteed by the eternity of Israel's God. The bush that burned and was not consumed was the emblem of Him who gives and is none the poorer, who works unwearied, who pours forth life and light through all ages to all creatures and diminishes no whit the fulness of the fountain of life which is with Him. And that undecaying, inexhausted being is the pledge of Israel's security, the guarantee that "He will not alter the thing that is gone out of His lips." It was the pledge and the basis of the great deliverance which made Israel a nation-it was a name that expressed God's purpose to form that people into His people, who should show forth His praise.

When we use it in our prayers, we contemplate and trust in and plead with Him with all these grand thoughts of eternal subsistence: inexhaustible power, unwearied strength, resources that never fail, purposes that never alter, a being that never fails, a nature lifted high above the mutations of time, who dwells in a region above all tenses and moods and is, and was, and is to come in one ineffable and mysterious present. Nor only so, but we likewise say, "and this rock of ages, the basis of all that is, has spoken and entered into the bonds of love and covenant with men, so that they can plead with Him His revealed character and appeal to Him on the ground of His ancient promise and begin all their believing petitions with that cry, 'O Jehovah, who livest for evermore; O Jehovah, the God of the covenant and the deliverer of thy people!'"

And, further, note the other name on which the psalmist rests both petitions and pleas, "O thou my God." I need only remark that, so far as its own proper meaning is concerned, this name contains only what one might call the natural conception of divinity, as distinguished from the former, which is emphatically the name of the God of revelation. The word implies the abundance and fulness of power and so may be found, and often is found, on the lips of heathens. It contemplates the Almightyness rather than the moral attributes or covenant relations of God, as the ground of our hopes.

But then note how this general conception, which in itself does not travel beyond the idea common to all men of an unseen might throned in the heavens, becomes special on the psalmist's lips by the little word which he prefixes to it, "my God."

So far as we can judge from the Scriptures, it was David who first ventured to claim by that name the might of the God of Israel for his. "My God" is the token stamped upon David's psalms. The warmth of personal affection which throbs through them and the firmness of personal confidence are wonderfully expressed by that one word, which appropriates the strength and grace of the covenant for the solace of the single soul, "my".

Whether this psalm be his, or, as seems most probable, the work of a later lover of God, it is moulded after the type of his psalms. This second invocation of God derives its force from that one word which contemplates the unlimited strength and divine loftiness as completely possessed by and enlisted on the side of the poor soul that cries to Him. His bold and reverent hand stretches out to grasp the whole fulness of God. Thou art the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the whole earth-but thou art my God, mine for my faith, mine for my help.

Then, the final name which the psalmist here employs-"Lord"-is not, as a mere English reader might suppose, the same word as that which is rendered "Lord" in the first verse. That, as we have said, is Jehovah. This means just what our English word lord means; it conveys the general idea of authority and dominion. If you will observe, it is the most frequent name in this psalm. Its force on the psalmist's lips, and the thoughts which he associated with it, may be gathered from succeeding verses. "Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord, neither are there any works like unto thy works," where incomparable elevation and supreme dominion are ascribed to Him. So, the psalmist goes on, "All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord, and shall glorify thy name, for thou art great," where the thoughts of universal sovereignty and exaltation above all are deduced from that name.

So, then, when we blend all these together, it is as if the psalmist had said, "The ever living, the covenant Jehovah, my God in whom I claim a personal interest, who loves me with an individualizing love, and cares for me with a specific care, the absolute monarch and sovereign of the whole universe is He to whom I come with my supplication. I think of His names, I trust in them, I present them to Him whom they all but partially declare; and I ask Him-for His own name's sake, because of what He is and hath declared Himself to be-to hear my poor cry, to answer my imperfect faith, to show Himself yet once again that which His name has from of old proclaimed Him to be."

For us to know and trust that name is the highest exercise of all faith. To utter it believing is the very essence of all true prayer. Not as a formal beginning and as a formal close, but as the only ground of acceptance, do we connect it with our petitions. It should begin our prayers as their foundation; it should end them as their seal.

The bare utterance of a name may be the purest formalism, or it may be the most intense faith. The deepest love often finds that all language fails and that to breathe the beloved name is enough. All tenderness may be put in it- all rapture, all praise. Do you remember the wonderful story of the resurrection morning: "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She . . . saith unto him Rabboni?" (John 21:16). Her name on His lips was enough for unveiling His heart and revealing His person; His name on her lips was enough to express the confession of her faith, the eager rush of her spirit to Him, the outpouring of her heart, the ecstasy of her gladness that had died with Him and lived now, raised again from the dead.

Did any of you, parents, ever hear your child wake from sleep with some panic and shriek the mother's name through the darkness? Was not that a more powerful appeal than all words? And, depend upon it, that the soul which cries aloud to God, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," though it have "no language but a cry," will never call in vain.

#### Petitions

We have examined our calling on God, and now we turn to the petitions which these verses give us.

As I have said, they are all substantially the same, and yet they so vary as to suggest how familiar all the aspects of the deliverance that the psalmist desired were to him. We may discern, I think, a progress of thought through them, upon which I touch for a moment. The petitions are: "Bow shine ear," "hear me," "preserve me," "save thy servant," "be merciful unto me," "rejoice the soul of thy servant." There is, first, the cry that God would hear, the basis of all that follows. There is then a three-fold description of the process of deliverance: "preserve," "save," "be merciful." Then there is a longing for that which comes after the help, a consequence of the hearing: "Make the soul of thy servant glad."

It is very significant, and may teach us some lessons worth learning, that the psalmist, prior to all special supplication, begins with that cry-"Incline shine ear; hear me." "What!" you say, "does not God know everything?" Oh, yes, no doubt. And do you think that what I may call the cold, passionless, natural knowledge of omniscience is enough for our hearts? Something more goes to the "hearing" of prayer than the necessary omniscience of an infinite divine nature. There is an act of loving will, which is most clearly conveyed by that strong, and yet plain and intelligible, metaphor, "Bow down shine ear," as an eager listener puts his hand to his ear and bends the lobe of it in the direction of the sound.

He prays, too, in that petition, for what we may call hearing embedded in an act of deliverance. With God, to hear is to answer. As soon as we desire, He knows our longing; as soon as He knows our longing, He meets it with His gift. No appreciable time is occupied in the passage of the imploring message from earth to heaven, none in the return message of blessing from heaven to earth. As David says, in the grand psalm which recounts his deliverances, "My cry came before him, even into his ears. Then the earth shook and trembled" (Psalm 18:6-7). He hears when He lovingly regards our prayers; He hears when he mightily answers our cry- and these two are one.

The psalmist further prays for acts of help and deliverance: "Preserve my soul;" "save thy servant;" "be merciful unto me." These petitions are all substantially the same, but yet there are shades of difference between them which deserve notice. The first of them might be rendered, "guard" or "watch" my soul, and that rendering helps us to distinguish it from the others. Looking at all three, we see that the first prays for protection, the second goes a step further and prays for happy issue of that protection in safety, and the third digs deeper and prays for that mercy which is the sole foundation of both the protection and the safety which it ensures. God's guardianship achieves our salvation, and His saving guardianship is the fruit of His mercy.

While these three petitions then differ thus, in that they contemplate the process of our deliverance in its deepest root, in its patient, sedulous method, and in its happy end, they also differ in that they embody varying thoughts of the need and weakness of the suppliant. In the first two petitions he regards himself as defenseless and in peril. He needs a great hand to be cast around him, in the hollow of which he may be safe. His soul lies open to the assaults of foes like some little unwallled village in the plains, and he craves the garrison and guardianship of God's presence, the watchfulness of His unslumbering, omnipresent eye.

In the last petition, he thinks of himself as lowly and unworthy-for "mercy" is love shown to inferiors or to those who deserve something else. The consciousness of helplessness has become a consciousness of sin. Protection is not all that we need; there must be pardon too. That hand which is to be outstretched to guard and save might justly have been outstretched to smite. The sole ground of our confidence that God will be "our guard while troubles last" and will save us with a full salvation at the last is our trust that He will not refuse mercy to those who own their sin and seek forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

It is worth notice, too, that in all this variety of petitions for deliverance there is not a word about the exact manner of it. The way in which God's mercy is to guard and save is left, with meek patience, to God's decision. Let us not prescribe to Him the path which He shall take, but commit that to His own loving wisdom. There are two methods of lightening a burden-one is to diminish the load, the other is to strengthen the shoulders that carry it. The latter is often the more blessed-and often the shape in which God answers our prayer. "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Then, in the final petition, the Psalm rises still higher and-not satisfied with imploring that God would hear, guard, and save-asks for gladness, too, "Rejoice the soul of thy servant."

We may venture to ask for and expect gladness if we are God's servants. All His creatures have a claim on Him for blessedness according to their capacity, so long as they stand where He has set them. And we who have departed from that obedience which is joy may yet, in penitent abasement, return to Him and ask that He would rejoice the soul of His servant. David's deepest repentance dared to ask, "Make me to hear joy and gladness that the bones which thou hath broken may rejoice" (Psalm 51:8). Our most troubled utterances of sore need, our sighs and groans, should be accompanied with faith which feels the summer's sun of joy even in the midwinter of our pain and sees vineyards in the desert.

We should believe in and hope and ask for more than bare deliverance-hard though it may be to think that gladness is any more possible. Blossoms and flowers will come again, even though untimely frosts have burned the young leaves into brown powder. No sorrow is so crushing and hopeless, but that happiness may again visit the heart where trust and love abide. Only let us remember that this psalm seeks for joy where it seeks to help, not from earthly sources but from God.

They who find their deliverance in God are often tempted to find their pleasure somewhere else. It is often easier to pray with tears, "Preserve me and save me," than with undistracted love to choose Him as our only delight. But the true devout heart turns equally to God for all its needs, and its prayer ever is, "Judge me, O God, and plead my cause . . . O deliver me . . . Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy (Psalm 43:1, 4).

## Pleas

Finally, we have to consider the pleas on which these petitions are based.

The logic of prayer here is so remarkable and beautiful. Every feature of the psalmist's condition and character, as well as all that he knows of God, becomes on his lips a reason with God for granting his prayer. The same ingenuity of faith-if one might use such a phrase, which that Syro-Phoenician woman showed when she laid hold of the apparent rejection of her plea and gave back to Christ His own parable as a reason for His compliance comes out here.

These pleas part into three. He pleads his necessities. He is "poor and needy," or rather, perhaps-giving a distinct meaning to each word-"afflicted and poor," borne down by the pressure of outward calamity and destitute of inward resources. So the one phase of our need is the evils that oppress us from without, and the other is the lack of power from within to bear up against these. Circumstances and character both constitute an appeal to God. Or, more simply, we are weighed upon with sore distress, and we are likewise deprived of all means either outside of us or within us.

Yes, Christian friends, by God's mercy we are emboldened to take our weakness, our helplessness, as pleas with Him. We know how often the sight of misery touched the heart of Christ and how He was "moved with compassion," and we believe that the compassion of Christ is our truest image of the pity of our God. The yawning emptiness of our parched hearts, thirsting for God like the cracked ground during a drought, is a plea with Him.

And when we draw near to His throne, we do not need to present our merits but our necessities in order to receive the answer. "Lord save, we perish" is our best cry to awaken to energy the hand that never sleeps.

Let no consciousness of evil drive us from Him, but rather let it impel us close to Him. The devil's lie is that we are too bad to go to Him. The truth is that our necessities-yes and our sins too-may be made pleas with Him. "Pardon mine iniquity; for it is great" (Psalm 25:11).

He pleads his relation to God and his longing for communion with Him. "I am holy." That sounds strange. There seems to be flavor of self-righteousness about it which startles one. But there is no such thought in the word, and the "holy" of the English version completely obscures the psalmist's thought. It will be enough here to say that the word of the original simply means "one who is a recipient or object of mercy." It is passive, not active, in signification. Of course the mercy meant is God's mercy, so that the meaning is as our Bible has it in the margin, "One whom thou favorest."

The plea then here is drawn, not from the righteousness of the man, but from the mercy of God. It sets forth the relation between God and His suppliant from the divine side, and pleads God's gracious bestowal of mercy upon him in the past as a reason for its continuance and perfecting. "Thou hast been pleased to love and favor me, to enrich me with thy grace. Be what thou hast been: do what thou hast done: forsake not the work of mine own hands." And God, who begins no buildings which He is not able to finish, recognizes the strength of the plea and will perfect that which concerneth us.

There follows the same relation contemplated from the human side, and that, too, is a plea with God. "Thy servant that trusteth in thee." I am knit to Thee, as a servant I belong to Thy household, and the Master's honour is concerned in His dependent's safety. The slave is cared for by His Lord. I belong to Thee-do thou watch over what is mine own. I trust in Thee. We do not plead our faith as constituting a claim of merit with God, but as constituting a plea with Him. It is not that it deserves deliverance-else we might well hesitate to urge it, when we think of its weakness and often interruptions-but that it is sure to bring deliverance. For anything is possible rather than that the most tremulous trust should go unblessed and unanswered.

The human side of the relation between God and His servant is further urged in the subsequent clauses which refer to the Psalmist's longings and efforts after fellowship with God. "I cry unto thee daily" - he does not think that his cry deserves an answer, but he knows that in God's great mercy He has bound Himself to "hear our cry and save us", and he appeals to the faithful promise. He has put in practice the condition, and he expects the answer. It can only happen that he who calls on God will be answered. Anything is credible rather than that our prayer ascending should be flung back unanswered, as if it had struck against heavens which were brass. Let our faith clasp His promise, and then the fact of our prayer is with God a plea, and with us a pledge of His answer. Let us not doubt that we do wield power with God when we pray - and we shall prevail.

Again he pleads, "Unto thee do I lift up my soul." Such a plea expresses the conscious effort to raise his whole being above earth, to lift the heavy grossness of his nature, bound in the fetters of sense to this low world, up and up to the Most High, who is his home. And can it be that that yearning and striving after communion shall go unsatisfied? Is it possible that I shall stretch out feeling hands and grope in vain for God? Is it possible that He shall not take note of me, that my poor faith shall be disappointed, that my prayer shall be lost in empty space, that my soul shall not find its rest? Never. "What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? . . . How much more shall your father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matthew 7:9, 11).

And, finally, because our necessities and our desires derive their force as pleas from God's own character, he urges that as his last and mightiest appeal. He began with invocation, and he ends as he began. The name of God is the ground of all our hope and the motive for all His mercy. Turn away, Christian friends, from all thoughts of self, of your own needs, of your own trust, and prayer, and aspiration. Forsaking all other confidence, flee to that "name of the Lord" into which, as "a strong tower," we may "run and be safe." The one prevalent plea with God is the faithful recounting of all that grace and pity which He is exercising and has exercised. All others are subordinate and possess only a power bestowed by this. "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee." Our need is the occasion; faith and desire, the channel; but God is the reason and the source of all our deliverance and all our salvation. "Because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself" (Hebrews 6:13)-and because we can pray by none other, we implore Him by Himself, for the sake of His own Holy Name, because He is that He is, to have mercy upon us who cry to Him.

And, friends, when we call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and ask that our prayers may be heard "for the sake of Christ," we are taking no other plea into our lips than that ancient and all prevalent one of this psalm. It is His own mercy in Christ which we present. It is the work of His own love which we bring as our plea. "I will declare thy name unto my brethren" (Psalm 22:22). Christ is the Revealer of the Father's name, and they who pray in the name of Christ have for their confidence this promise, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13) - and this, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you" (John 16:23).

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