Teresa of Avila Prayer Material

Opening Prayers

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Opening Prayers

Here are two prayers you could use to begin your daily prayer or that you might simply use for your reflection one day in lieu of one of the others prayer suggestions.

O compassionate and loving God of my soul! You invite all who thirst to come to you, promising to give them drink.

I already know, my God, that out of Your goodness You will give it. You Yourself say so; Your words cannot fail.

O Life, who gives life to all! Do not deny me this sweetest water that You promise to those who want it. I want it, my God, and I beg for it, and I come to You. Don’t hide Yourself from me, since You know my need and that this water is the true medicine for a soul wounded with Love of You.

O living founts from the wounds of my God, how you have flowed with great abundance for our sustenance, and how surely those who strive to sustain themselves with this divine liqueur will flourish.

(Teresa of Avila)

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
No hands, no feet on earth but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which He moves
Compassion on the World;
Yours are the feet
With which He walks to do good;
Yours are the hands
With which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands,
Yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes,
You are His Body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
No hands, no feet on earth but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which He moves
Compassion on this World;
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

(St. Teresa’s Prayer)
We have described Teresa as:
- a Woman of Determination
- a Woman of Courage and Confidence in the Lord
- a Woman of Receptivity to God’s Word
- a Woman who Took Joy in Life
- a woman of Relationship
- a woman of Repentance

Reflect on the extent to which these characteristics can be applied to you and your life. As you do, it may be helpful to reflect on one or more of the following questions, considering how Teresa’s words might help us:

- How do I greet God’s call to a particular mission? With love? With joy and excitement? Or with doubts and worry? How can I respond more fully to God?

  “Our God does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as with the love with which we do it.”

  “Have great confidence, for it is necessary not to hold back one’s desire, but to believe in God that if we try we shall little by little, even though it may not be soon, reach the state the saints did with God’s help…I marvel at how important it is to be courageous in striving for great things along this path.”

  “O greatness of God! How you manifest your power in giving courage to an ant.”

- Does my self-worth, security and peace of mind depend on having more money, possessions or property than I “need”? How might I work to transfer my security from temporal goods to God?

  “What sufficient reason is there for delaying even a short time instead of seeking this God, as the Bride did [in the Song of Songs] through streets and squares? Oh, what a mockery is everything in the world if it does not lead us and help us on the way towards this end – and would be even though all the worldly delights and riches and joys that we can imagine were to last forever! For everything is cloying and degrading by comparison with these treasures, which we shall enjoy eternally. And even these are nothing by comparison with having for our own our God of all treasures and of Heaven and earth.”

- Do I follow Jesus’ advice to Teresa to do what lies in my power, surrendering to Jesus and not allowing myself to be disturbed by anything?

  “Let us try hard, let us trust hard.”

- Does my focus on prayer and work prevent me from enjoying life? Do I allow myself to appreciate all that God has given us in creation?

  “When I fast, I fast, when I eat partridge, I eat partridge.”

  “Be joyful, my soul, for there is someone who loves your God as God deserves.”
Teresa of Avila: Foundations of Prayer

For Teresa, love, detachment and humility were the basic necessities of the spiritual life. Without them, one can not make progress in prayer. Reflect on some of what Teresa had to say in her discussion of the First Mansion in the Interior Castle about these foundations of prayer, considering where you might need extra grace from God.

Love:

“True perfection consists in the love of God and of our neighbour, and the more nearly perfect is our observance of these two commandments, the nearer to perfection we shall be….

“Mutual love is so important for us that I should like you never to forget it; for if the soul goes about looking for trifling faults in others (which sometimes may not be imperfections at all, though perhaps our ignorance may lead us to make the worst of them) it may lose its own peace of mind and perhaps disturb that of others.”

Detachment:

“Let us rather think of certain other souls, who…are very much absorbed in worldly affairs; but their desires are good; sometimes, though infrequently, they commend themselves to Our Lord; and they think about the state of their souls, though not very carefully. Full of a thousand preoccupations as they are, they pray only a few times a month, and as a rule they are thinking all the time of their preoccupations, for they are very much attached to them, and, where their treasure is, there is their heart also. From time to time, however, they shake their minds free of them and it is a great thing that they should know themselves well enough to realize that they are not going the right way to reach the castle door. Eventually they enter the first room on the lowest floor, but so many reptiles get in with them that they are unable to appreciate the beauty of the castle or to find any peace within it.”

Humility:

“Humility must always be doing its work like a bee making its honey in the hive: without humility all will be lost. Still, we should remember that the bee is constantly flying about from flower to flower, and in the same way, believe me, that soul must sometimes emerge from self-knowledge and soar aloft in meditation upon the greatness and the majesty of its God. Doing that will help it to realize its own baseness better than thinking of its own nature….So long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility….

“So long as we are buried in the wretchedness of our earthly nature these streams of ours will never disengage from the slough of cowardice, pusillanimity and fear….[Many misgivings arise] from our lack of self-knowledge. We get a distorted idea of our own nature, and, if we never stop thinking about ourselves, I am not surprised if we experience fears. It is for this reason, daughters, that I say we must set our eyes upon Christ our Good, from Whom we shall learn true humility, and also upon His saints.”
Teresa of Avila: Person of Prayer

Teresa spent much time teaching her sisters and others how to be closer to God in their prayer. Consider how some of her instruction might apply to our own situations.

“Hardly have we begun to imagine that our heads are aching than we stay away from choir…. One day we are absent because we had a headache some time ago; another day, because our head has just been aching again; and on the next three days in case it should ache once more.”

Do I find excuses not to take time to be with God? Do I allow various types of aches, distractions and occupations to keep me away from prayer?

“What an amusing kind of progress in the love of God it is, to tie God’s hands by thinking that God cannot help us except by one path.”

Do I get caught up in one way of praying? Do I require of God a particular way of answering my petitions?

“Resolve to give God a particular time of prayer every day and never take it back again, whatever we may suffer through trials annoyances or aridities.”

“Those of you who cannot engage in much discursive reflection with the intellect or keep your mind from distraction, get used to this practice! Get used to it! See, I know that you can do this; for I suffered many years from the trial…of not being able to quiet the mind in anything. But I know that our God does not leave us so abandoned; for if we humbly ask God for this friendship, God will not deny it to us. And if we cannot succeed in one year, we will succeed later. Let’s not regret the time that is so well spent. Who’s making us hurry.”

Do I get easily discouraged when my prayer is difficult? Am I willing to “Get used to it” and stay at it?

“It used to help me to look at a field, or water or flowers. These reminded me of the Creator – I mean, they awakened me, helped me to recollect myself and thus served me as a book……Go to some place where you can see the sky, and walk up and down a little.”

What happens when I stop insisting concerning controlling my relationship with God and open myself up to finding God in all things?
Teresa’s Method of Praying the Lord’s Prayer

Teresa spent a lot of time teaching her sisters and others how to be closer to God in prayer. One of the things she spent a lot of time teaching them about is the Lord’s Prayer, which she felt should not involve simple recitation of words. She was firm in saying that if all one were doing was moving one’s lips without some mental act that acknowledges who one is addressing and what one is doing, it is not prayer.

To be prayed in an authentic manner, she believed the words must be joined by mental prayer. Teresa refers to this as recollective prayer – reciting a set prayer in a recollected fashion. A hallmark of the prayer is an ongoing effort to keep God in mind, to recall God’s constant presence. Teresa recognized that distractions would arise in those praying in this way. She urges that when such distractions arise, one gently brings the mind back to God.

To pray the Lord’s Prayer in this way was something she strongly urged on her sisters, teaching that “all contemplation and perfection” are enshrined in this one prayer”. She suggested they take a whole hour to pray it once. She instructed:

“We may take a whole hour over saying [the Lord’s prayer] once, if we can realize that we are with God, and what it is we are asking God and how willing God is, like any parent, to grant it to us, and how God loves to be with us and comfort us. For love of the Lord, then, sisters, accustom yourselves to saying the ‘Our Father’ in this recollected way, and before long you will see how you gain by doing so. It is a method of prayer which establishes habits that prevent the soul from going astray and the faculties from becoming restless. This you will find out in time. I only beg you to test it, even at the cost of a little trouble, which always results when we try to form a new habit. I assure you, however, that before long you will have the great comfort of finding it unnecessary to tire yourselves with seeking this holy Father to Whom you pray, for you will discover God within you.”

In The Way of Perfection, Teresa spends a number of chapters giving a commentary on the Lord’s Prayer. As an introduction to your prayer today, here are some comments on her reflection on the first line: Our Father, Who Art in Heaven.

Teresa calls this line, occurring as it does as the first line of the prayer “a reward so large that it would easily fill the intellect and thus occupy the will in such a way one would be unable to speak a word.” In it, Jesus humbles himself in joining us in prayer and making himself our brother. Teresa marvels at Jesus’ desire that God consider us his children and at the result of that desire – Because Jesus word cannot fail and God is obliged to be true to it, God as our Father must bear with us no matter how serious our offense. In Teresa’s words: “If we return to God like the prodigal son, God has to pardon us. God has to console us in our trials. God has to sustain us in the way a parent must.
For, in effect, God must be better than all the parents in the world because in God everything must be faultless. And after all this God must make us sharers and heirs with” Jesus.

So in this one first line of the prayer, Teresa finds all of Jesus love for us as well as the humility that allows Jesus to stop at nothing to become one with us.

Today’s (Day 4) prayer experience is to pray the Lord’s Prayer as Teresa instructed her sisters, spending some time in silent contemplation of each line. The idea here is not to engage in a long thought process about the line, but only as much thinking as it takes to find something in the line – a word or an image or a feeling or sense - that connects one to God’s presence and love and to be in that place with God.

For tomorrow (Day 5), prayer, engage in the same process with another prayer. I’ve included two as possibilities: the Hail Mary and the Anima Christi. But if there is another prayer that has special significance for you, feel free to use that.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

Our Father, Who Art in Heaven

Hallowed Be Your Name

You kingdom come

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil. Amen.
Hail Mary

Hail Mary, Full of Grace
The Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus
Holy Mary, Mother of God
Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Anima Christi (contemporary paraphrase)

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.
May your body and blood be my food and drink.
May your passion and death be my strength and life.
Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.
May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.
Let me not run from the love which you offer,
But hold me safe from the forces of evil.
On each of my dyings shed your light and your love,
Keep calling me until that day comes,
When, with your saints, I may praise you forever. Amen.
In the Hands of God

Teresa wrote some beautify poetry. Here is one that provides much fruit for contemplation. Use as much or as little of is as moves you for today’s prayer.

I am Yours and born for you,
What do You want of me?

Majestic Sovereign, Unending wisdom,
Kindness pleasing to my soul;
God sublime, one Being Good,
Behold this one so vile.
Singing of her love to you:
What do You want of me?

Yours, you made me,
Yours, you saved me,
Yours, you endured me,
Yours, you called me,
Yours, you awaited me,
Yours, I did not stray.
What do you want of me?

Good Lord, what do you want of me?
What is this wretch to do?
What work is this,
This sinful slave to do?
Look at me, Sweet Love,
Sweet Love, look at me,
What do you want of me?

In your hand I place my heart,
Body, life and soul,
Deep feelings and affections mine,
Spouse – Redeemer sweet,
Myself offered now to you,
What do you want of me?

Give me death, give me life,
Health or sickness, Honor or shame,
War or swelling peace,
Weakness or full strength,
Yes, to these I say,
What do you want of me?

Give me wealth or want,
Delight or distress,
Happiness or gloominess,
Heaven or hell,
Sweet life, sun unveiled,
To you I give all.

What do you want of me?

Give me, if You will, prayer;
   Or let me know dryness,
An abundance of devotion,
   Or if not, then barrenness.
In you alone, Sovereign Majesty,
   I find my peace,
What do you want of me?

Give me then wisdom.
   Or for love, ignorance,
Years of abundance,
   Or hunger and famine.
Darkness or sunlight,
   Move me here or there:
What do you want of me?

If You want me to rest,
   I desire it for love;
If to labor, I will die working:
   Sweet Love say
Where, how and when.
What do You want of me?

Calvary or Tabor give me,
   Desert or fruitful land;
As Job in suffering
   Or John at Your breast;
Barren or fruited vine,
   Whatever be Your will:
What do you want of me?

Be I Joseph chained
   Or as Egypt’s governor,
Davie pained or exalted high,
Jonas drowned, or Jonas freed:
What do you want of me?

Silent or speaking,
Fruitbearing or barren,
My wounds shown by the Law,
Rejoicing in the tender Gospel;
Sorrowing or exulting.
You alone live in me:
What do you want of me?

Yours I am, for You I was born:
What do You want of me?
Meditation on the Song of Songs

Teresa wrote a long series of meditations on the Song of Songs in order to share with her Sisters her experience praying with this book of the Hebrew Scriptures.

One of the lines in the Song of Songs reads:

*My Beloved is mine and I am my Beloved’s*

Spend some time this morning contemplating that line, in the light of Teresa’s reflection on it:

“All I see, my Bridegroom, that You are mine. I cannot deny it. You came into the world for me; for me You underwent severe trials; for me You suffered many lashes; for me You remain in the most Blessed Sacrament; and now You grant me so many wonderful favors. Well then, O most holy bride, with what ardor I have said what you say: “What can I do for my Spouse?”

“Indeed, Sisters, I don’t know how to go on from here. How can I be Yours, my God? What can one who has used to unskillfully the favors You have granted do for You? What can be expected of her services? Since with Your help she does something, consider what a poor worm will be able to do. Why does Lord so powerful need her? Oh, love! How I would want so say this word everywhere because love alone is that which can dare say with the bride, *I am my Beloved’s.* He gives us permission to think that He, this true Lover, my Spouse and my Good, needs us.

“Since He gives us permission, let us repeat, daughters, my Beloved is mine and I am my Beloved’s. You are mine, Lord? If You come to me, why do I doubt that I will be able to serve You? From here on, Lord, I want to forget myself and look only at how I can serve You and have no other desire than to do Your will. But my desire is not powerful, my God; You are the powerful One. What I can do is be determined; thus from this very moment I am determined to serve You through deeds.”