

Relinquishment Prayer

By refusing to share our . . . worries, we limit God's lordship over our life and make clear that there are parts of us that we do not want to submit to a divine conversation.

Brennan Manning

Usually prayer is a question of groaning rather than speaking, tears rather than words. For He sets our tears in His sight, and our groaning is not hidden from Him who made all things by His Word and does not ask for words of man.

Augustine of Hippo

Jesus as Suffering Son of God

Throughout time humans have experienced deep disappointment, betrayal, evil and pain as the fabric of our lives. Suffering takes air from our souls and innocence from our hearts. Jesus, a God above all other gods, is acquainted with our sorrows and our grief. He sits with us in the dark. He has been there and has shown us a way up from the grave. Our God knows the twisted nature of evil and has overcome the dark. Jesus Christ embraced the sufferings of humanity.

The beginning of Jesus' victory was in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he accepted the Father's will and submitted to his fate. He accepted the path to his suffering, death, burial and resurrection. We often go to the cross to remember our salvation, but without the Garden the cross might have been a defeat and not a victory. Jesus' radical obedience in the Garden reminds us to relinquish to God our need to control, be safe and have the outcomes we want or to relinquish to God sinful behavior and relationships. The road to the open tomb began in the Garden of Gethsemane.

One of the most painted pictures of Jesus, after the crucifixion and resurrection, is his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. After his final meal Jesus prays in John 17 for his disciples that God will protect and sustain them. He also prays for those of us who would come to believe in him. Before Jesus entered his suffering he prayed for us. Then in the Garden, Jesus prays for himself. Jesus understood that a difficult journey of suffering would soon begin, and it would begin by the betrayal of one of his own. All three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—tell the story of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. John mentions the prayer in one verse.

This prayer is different from the Lord's Prayer though there are similarities. In both Jesus prays to the Father. Jesus asks that God's will be done, and he prays that his disciples not be led into temptation. However, the poetic beauty of the Lord's Prayer is a stark contrast to the intensity, emotion and desperation of the Garden prayer. Phrases such as "began to be grieved and agitated," and "deeply grieved unto death" and "threw himself on the ground" express the intense physical and emotional experience that it was for Jesus. Jesus suffered so much that in Luke 22:44 there is the sentence, "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." Luke as a physician recognized the significance of this rare phenomenon. People can, under extreme duress and agony such as when facing death, have blood in their sweat. Jesus was suffering.

When Jesus prays, he calls God "my Father," and in Mark he uses the intimate term, "Abba." He went to his Father with his pain and his questions and his requests. In Genesis Adam and Eve ran away from God and hid when they encountered their temptation in the Garden. When Jesus entered the Garden, he asked his disciples to stay awake, alert, so they would not fall into temptation. Jesus ran toward God. He brings to his Father a raw, disturbed and honest self.

He prays three times for deliverance. Making the same request three times is a biblical literary device to signify completeness. Jesus praying three times means that he prayed until he felt he had resolved the issue within himself and with God. Relinquishment is physiological and emotionally difficult. Therefore, we come to our Father over and over again like Jesus until we experience release.

Each time Jesus asked, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." The "if" does not mean that Jesus doubted whether God could make a different choice or not. The "if" means that "since" God can make a different choice, would he do it for him. Jesus accepted the utter sovereignty and power of God to make happen whatever God wanted to make happen. He also knew God to be holy and good. He came to his Father asking for another way.

Asking for "this cup to pass" has significance. The word cup, *poterion* in Greek, is an everyday drinking cup, and the word also describes the cup used in giving offerings in the temple.<sup>1</sup> Paul uses the "cup of offering" to describe the Last Supper to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:25). The cup represented to the early Christians the suffering they experienced because of the persecution. They took great comfort in Jesus' ability to face his own suffering. We each have our cups of suffering. No one wants to suffer. Jesus brought his suffering to God and asked for another way, but with each request he added, "Yet not what I want but what you want" and "your will be done." He trusted in God's absolute goodness and love despite the personal experience of suffering and pain.

Relinquishment Prayer

Jesus trusted himself to God. He trusted God's plan to redeem the world, its inhabitants and creatures because of God's great love. Suffering is everywhere because of evil and a broken world. No one escapes it. We can follow in Jesus' steps when we enter into our own cup of pain. We do this in prayer in an intimate relationship with God. In all honesty and with exposure of the deepest fears and traumas living in us whether from the evil of others or our own sin, we come to God. We continue in prayer until we experience release.

At the end of Jesus' prayer he willingly began his journey to the cross. This acceptance and this kind of love are a great mystery, and not one that is easily understood with theological insights or well-phrased answers. We see Jesus' journey, but when it is our own, it becomes terrifyingly personal. The mystery is that only in prayer, persistence in prayer, and raw, naked honesty can we experience the same victory of the open tomb, the end journey of suffering.

We often limit prayer to our requests and concerns. Jesus brought to God times of extreme distress and confusion. Prayer is a place where the most difficult personal issues of suffering, betrayal and the world's evil are brought to God. In the Garden Jesus' prayer was not answered but his assertion of trust in God was declared. In prayer we face the world's evil and accept the power of grace to overcome. The brilliance of grace is its capacity to convert evil to something holy and redemptive.

When Margaret Duggan's twenty-three-year-old niece died of cancer, she wrote telling me of her struggles with this horrific pain and loss:

Just a couple of days before Jenny's funeral, I sat in the car in the driveway at home—I'd been so angry at God, threatening and scornful of Jesus' physical suffering compared with what Jenny went through. I spent days "letting rip" and then this moment in the car, I thought, "There is no way out of this, there is only a way through it. I can either go through this with God—the God who I am so angry with right now—or I can go through it alone. Whichever way, I *will* have to go through this." In that moment in the car, I let go; I let go of blaming God for how Jenny died, let go of blaming him for not answering so many prayers, let go of his having to "work this together for good" for my family in order for Jenny's death to have any dignity or purpose—basically I let go of God needing to be anything other than what I've come to know him to be over these many years, my Friend and my Father of the good times and the bad. Over the course of those few moments, with my head on the steering wheel, I let go. No big sparks or whooshes of joy, but a sense of a deal done, a laying down of demands and a tremulous picking up of the hope of peace and the dream that one day the tears will stop.

Entering deeply into our pain is sometimes difficult. We don't like to give up control and we are afraid of our emotions. Emotions are thought to be a sign of weakness. So often we compartmentalize our suffering. Sometimes we simply say, "your will be done," without struggle, as a Band-Aid, and it does little to inspire or comfort others. True relinquishment requires honest emotion.

When we cry, tears originate in all parts of our brain. Tears are connected to our emotions in the limbic area of the brain, to our thinking such as reflective crying in the neocortex area of the brain, and to our survival in the brain stem where tears register fear for safety and pain. Tears reflect the entire human gamut of life experiences: grief, connection, despair, joy, frustration, anger and even physical stress. Crying is a significant human function. Jeffrey Kottler, in one of the few books written about crying, stated, "Tears are an authentication of meaning. They communicate powerfully, forcefully, honestly what you are feeling inside."<sup>2</sup>

I am a control freak. I attempt to subdue every force, to slay every dragon that seeks to uproot me from my peace. Paradoxically, it does little to give me peace. I had an experience ten years ago where I broke down in tears while I was alone in my apartment. I didn't know why. I thought I was having a nervous breakdown and began leafing through the phone book for the number of a local psych unit. About an hour later, as quickly as it began, the crying stopped and I shrugged it off. On the following Sunday, I was at church and while we were singing, I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I was on my knees. I don't remember kneeling down yet there I was, and I felt God say to me, "I am in control."

—Erik Young

Tears cannot be ignored. If someone is crying, everyone notices. Crying is an expression of powerlessness, if it is authentic and not manipulative. When we cry, it is a defining moment. We remember those times. Frederick Buechner, a pastor, writer and theologian, wrote, “Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. . . . More often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next.”<sup>3</sup>

Tears also symbolize surrender. When a person cries they are the most vulnerable. Alan W. Jones, in *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality*, explained, “Tears are the means by which we have the chance to *see* things differently and be rescued from whatever little hell we may have chosen for ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Tears uncover our life. Pretense is not possible. Masks fall off. Tears connect with the most primal part of our lives and tears connect us with others. Tears soften our hearts and open our minds.

In order to pray a prayer of relinquishment, we surrender control. We cling to the Father in the Garden until we are released by God. It requires a radical trust and a profound obedience that isn’t based on a naive, simplistic understanding of faith, but on a raw, distress-filled, emotional encounter with God. Our true selves touch the true nature of God. We find our peace, though the finding isn’t pretty. Alan Jones wrote, “When do tears come for the attentive believer? They begin to flow at the moment we see the contradiction between what we hope for and what we actually are; when we see the deep gulf between the Love that calls us and our response to it.”<sup>5</sup>

Prayer of Relinquishment Guidelines

- The prayer of relinquishment is needed when we feel stuck or disconnected from ourselves because of some life struggle or distress.
- The prayer might involve the need for surrender, such as Jesus in the Garden, or for release from some desire that occupies your thoughts, such as an addiction, disappointment or betrayal, or from a relationship that overwhelms us.
- The release from relinquishment cannot be forced. The timing is always God’s.
- The purpose of the prayer is many things: a new joy and freedom, transformation of the personality, attachment to God in a deeper way, a sincere desire to love others, a reordering of our priorities, purification of our motives and a commitment to trust God completely.
- The signs of relinquishment are the same as those Jesus experienced: new courage, clarity of heart and mind, and peace.
- Relinquishment takes time and the mind needs enough will to persist until the deed is done.
- Suffering is part of the experience of relinquishment, sometimes during and sometimes after.
- The hope of relinquishment is based on God’s love and the victory of the cross to overcome all evil in ourselves, in others and in the world.
- Relinquishment prayer is an emotional experience. It does not mean that copious tears are always present. Some people grieve with groans and inner distress. Tears often drive release.
- Relinquishment prayers are for great painful events, but they are also helpful for daily frustrations. It is a lifestyle of bringing to God all one’s struggles and doubts.
- The prayer is individual, but it is also communal. Sometimes institutions and communities need to struggle in prayer to let go of dreams, disappointments and injustices.

Prayer of Relinquishment Experience

Group Experience

- One experience is for a group to pray collectively a prayer of relinquishment about something that the group discerns is an issue of control or worry. Before the prayer, talk together about a common issue that causes the group concern and usually over which the group has no control.
- If the group is not one that has a collective concern, then do the prayer experience together but have each person identify their own issue. People might pair up and talk with a partner about something that is really bothering them or something they are afraid to relinquish. This could take ten to twenty minutes.
- The leader then begins with two to three minutes of silence in order to prepare for the experience.
- Read the passage in Matthew 26:36-46 while everyone’s eyes are closed. If some want they can get down on their knees or on the floor prostrate.

- The group then repeats after the leader with spaces between for reflection,

- “Abba, Father”
- “if it is possible, let this cup pass from us”(or “me” if the concerns are individual)
- “yet not what we (or I) want but what you want.”

- If this is a collective concern, have people pray aloud their fears or concerns with the issue. If these are individual concerns, have people pray with their partners, giving them time to verbalize before God their deepest thoughts and feelings.
- When the group prayers or partner prayers are completed, the leader prays, “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
- Have the group repeat after the leader with space for reflection: “Our (My) Father, if this cannot pass unless we (I) drink it, your will be done.”
- Then again, “Our (My) Father, if this cannot pass unless we (I) drink it, your will be done.” Continue in silence for a couple of minutes.
- Pray together the Lord’s Prayer or the leader closes with his or her own prayer for the group.
- At the close of the prayer time, take time to talk together about your experience. How did the prayer impact your feelings or understandings about the concern? How might the group or individuals continue to relinquish to God their concern? Are there any questions or thoughts about this prayer?

Partner Experience

- Talk together about a worry or concern you could relinquish to God.
- Read the passage in Matthew 26:36-46.
- Go back and forth between partners, praying about the issue you want to relinquish. At the end of each vocalized prayer, pray “yet not my will but your will be done.”
- Do this three times.
- At the end of the prayer time, pray the Lord’s Prayer together.
- Share together and talk about your experience and any questions or thoughts you might have. How might you continue to support each other in your relinquishment prayers?

Individual Experience

- For four days pray the Garden Prayer of Relinquishment for fifteen minutes each day.
- If you can, do this prayer early in the morning or late in the evening when you can be completely alone.
- Think of something that worries you a lot, something for which you are bitter and distracted or something that you have to do but don’t want to do.
- As much as possible, imitate Jesus’ Garden experience. Get on your knees or prostrate yourself and bring your concern fully to God.
- Follow the pattern of asking for release three times and saying like Jesus, “yet not my will but your will be done.” If you need to ask more often, do so.
- Each day you can bring the same thing or different things to God. Journal about your experience or talk with a friend about it. How might you sustain a prayer experience of relinquishing control or fears and worries to God?

	PRAYER JOURNEY
Victoria Marty	

For most of my life I believed that taking care of my mom was my responsibility and mine alone. She has struggled with mental illness and often wasn't stable or functional. For years she barely got by financially and emotionally. Many times I cried out to the Lord to help her make better decisions and to help her get help, but things only got worse.

A year ago, I took matters into my own hands, believing I was the answer to her problems. After months of talking and planning she moved in with us, hoping she could find a job here and get her own place. It was the worst six months of my life. My mom refused to get a job. She refused to help herself even though we were providing everything she needed to get on her feet. She and my husband fought all the time and finally she and I had the biggest fight ever. A week later her boyfriend from New Mexico came and got her, so she returned with hopes of marriage for the sixth time.

At that moment I realized I had to let her go, completely and totally. I could no longer bear her pain or choices. The only person who could keep her, carry her and complete her is Jesus. I relinquished her to the Lord's keep and I cried out to the Lord to take her, to care for her and to heal her spiritually. And he did! He is so faithful. When I finally came to my wits' end and let her go, he picked her up and has taken care of her ever since. She didn't get married, and she and I are closer than ever. She relies on the Lord for her strength. I could never imagine she would be in such a good place, mentally, spiritually and physically. It took me letting go for God to fulfill his plan.

**James Pagels**

This week in praying the prayer of relinquishment, I struggled with the location for this prayer. I either pray in my office or while walking. Walking doesn't work for this form of prayer. My office is small, and very cold. I ended up using a hallway. I decided that I would really push myself and lie face-down on the floor while praying—I thought that the position might posture my heart correctly.

The first day I lay there with nothing on my mind but, "I'm cold and uncomfortable—I hope no one comes up here and finds me lying on the floor." Day two I thought, "I'll be persistent in my praying and try again." I still struggled with thoughts of being caught praying like this. I finally said, "God I give in. I'll continue to pray this way until I hear from you." The third day I had a short list of areas where I was holding on to things that caused stress and anxiety in my life. I verbally laid these things before God and left them there.

On the fourth day God began to show me how my greatest desire was to be successful as a church with increased attendance, great worship and plenty of finances. This was no surprise to me, but then he took me back to my interns and my poor loving of them. This was just one way in which holding on to my desire for success caused me to love poorly and damaged my leadership of people toward God. As the weight of this issue began to sink in, I found I didn't want to let it go. I argued with God that things needed to be a certain way, that people wouldn't come to church and then where would we be?

After a while, I realized my fists and jaw were clenched, and I remembered, "I'm here to lay down my anxiety and stress—to let go!" I willed my hands open and said aloud, "Father, not my will but yours be done." Then the floodgates of emotion opened and I cried. I was a mess! Since that day I have daily given this to God and I imagine will have to for some time.

**Further Reading**

Foster, Richard J. *Prayers from the Heart*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.  
Richards, Fr. Larry. *Surrender: The Life-Changing Power of Doing God's Will*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011.