

Fifty Prayers

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FOREWORD



I could certainly not have dreamed in the earlier decades of my life that another little book of prayers would come out under my name. In my youth, I had a dislike for all manner of worship formalities. And only a few years ago, the well-known leader of the Alpirsbach Movement, whom I rather like, said of me that I understand nothing of liturgy. Indeed, when I had to preach before the “altars” of the German churches, I moved with uncertainty. In my old Bonn days, I even once stood behind the “altar” instead of in front of it, in a decided sense of my own power, but I could not do that a second time. (Now, of course, even the Roman Mass is often celebrated from there!) For other reasons, my friend Günther Dehn made me leave the Poppelsdorf church after the war with the harsh censure “Preaching: A. Liturgy: D.” And so, with the contents of this little book, I have entered into the society of true liturgy only through a back door.

For a long time I never felt good when before

and after my sermons I thought I should, or was allowed, to keep to the order of the usual liturgical books halfway here and there (or simply out of laziness?). I was disturbed by the lack of functional relationships, but also by the inorganic relationship between the archaic or even the modern language of these prayers and the language of my sermons. For a while, I sought help by replacing the petitions of the order of liturgy not with extemporaneous prayers (I have never dared to risk such a thing), but with freely bringing together biblical passages from the Psalms. Only in more recent years did I begin to set forth such texts, first for the end and later for the beginning of the main part of the worship service, within the context of preparing for the sermons themselves.

These sermons, together with the prayers, have been published in the collections *Fürchte dich nicht* and *Dem Gefangenen Befreiung*. I have always resisted the idea the sermons would be published without the prayers that went with them. In short, the considerations that guided me were these: The worship service, as the center of the entire life of the community, must be presented as a whole, a whole of calling on the gracious God. Following the greeting of the community as the people of this God, the worship begins with the common singing, which I think is not seen as being as important as it truly is. It continues with the pronouncement of the community's thanks, its penance, and its special petition for God's presence and support in the special act of gathering for worship, by the member of the community who

serves as the leader of the action. It ascends to the sermon, in which the call to explanation and application of the Scripture passage (better short than long!) is spoken and proclaimed. From here, it descends to the final prayer, in which the proclamation of the sermon is briefly summarized (with a direct call to God), but in which the worship service is possibly opened, above all, as an outstretched petition to the outside, to all other people, to the rest of the church and the world (is this not too often neglected?). In the second common singing, the assembly makes this final prayer their own. They are dismissed by the serving community member with the giving of the blessing, "The LORD bless you and keep you . . ." (not us!). (If it were up to me, then this formula would also be used for the services of baptism and Holy Communion.) The spice for all parts of all spiritual and theological sayings should consist in brevity!

The prayers that are collected in this little book are formulated within this context. The divisions into the "liturgical year" in which they appear and the titles for the various divisions are not mine. But I would certainly approve of them. Those elements, especially of petition, that are too bound to the time they were prayed can be omitted here (I am thinking specifically of prayers for the Swiss Army that was often guarding the border during the time of war, and also in his time for the just-chosen Pope John XXIII).

I cannot expect that the essence and structure of the worship service that I have just sketched out for clarification will meet with general acceptance.

But it may be—and this was the thought of the friends who troubled themselves with the collection and publication of these prayers—that the prayers might prove to be useful, even without the presupposition of my perhaps too-Reformed “liturgical” conception. My vision is not that the prayers, such as they are, will simply be taken over by communities and preachers, but rather that they might be read as a stimulus for earnest consideration. Might the worship leader, in and with the assembled community, use the prayers as the object of his own special, careful attention and work? The prayers might also be welcome here and there for personal and private use.

Basel, Advent 1962

Karl Barth

You Know Who We Are

Lord, our God, you know who we are: People with good and bad consciences; satisfied and dissatisfied, sure and unsure people; Christians out of conviction and Christians out of habit; believers, half-believers, and unbelievers.

You know where we come from: from our circle of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, or from great lonelines; from lives of quiet leisure, or from all manner of embarrassment and distress; from ordered, tense, or destroyed family relationships; from the inner circle, or from the fringes of the Christian community.

But now we all stand before you: in all our inequality equal in this, that we are all in the wrong before you and among each other; that we all must die some day; that we all would be lost without your grace; but also in that your grace is promised to and turned toward all of us through your beloved Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We are here together in order to praise you by allowing you to speak to us. We ask that this might

happen in this hour in the name of your Son, our Lord. Amen.

2 Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for the eternal, living, saving Word that in Jesus you have spoken and continue to speak to us human beings. Do not allow us to hear it only in a cursory fashion and to be too lazy to obey it. Do not let us fall, but remain near each one of us with your comfort, and between each of us and our fellow human beings with your peace. Let dawn continue to break a little in our hearts, in this institution, at home with those who are dear to us, in this city, in our nation, and throughout the whole earth. You know the errors and misdeeds that make our current situation once again so dark and dangerous on all sides. Let a fresh wind blow through it, that might at least scatter the thickest fog from the heads of those who rule this world, but also from the heads of the peoples who permit themselves to be ruled, and above all from the heads of those who make public opinion. And have mercy on all of those who are sick in body and in spirit, the many for whom life is suffering, those who are lost and confused through their own or others' fault, those who have no human friends or helpers. Show our youth also what true freedom and genuine joy are, and do not leave the old and the dying without the hope of the resurrection and eternal life. But you are the first, who are concerned about our sorrows, and you are the only one who can turn them to good. We thus can and want only to lift our eyes up toward you. Our help comes from you, who made heaven and earth. Amen.

Advent: Your Gift to Receive

3 Lord, may you now let us this year once more approach the light, celebration, and joy of Christmas Day that brings us face to face with the greatest thing there is: your love, with which you so loved the world that you gave your only Son, so that all of us may believe in him and therefore not be lost, but may have eternal life.

What could we possibly bring and give to you? So much darkness in our human relationships and in our own hearts! So many confused thoughts, so much coldness and defiance, so much carelessness and hatred! So much over which you cannot rejoice, that separates us from one another and certainly cannot help us! So much that runs directly against the message of Christmas!

What should you possibly do with such gifts? And what are you to do with such people as we all are? But all of this is precisely what you want to receive from us and take from us at Christmas—the whole pile of rubbish and ourselves, just as we are—in order to give us in return Jesus, our Savior, and

in him a new heaven and a new earth, new hearts and a new desire, new clarity and a new hope for us and for all people.

Be among us as we once again, on this final Sunday before the celebration, together prepare to receive him as your gift! Make it so that we may rightly speak, hear, and pray, in proper, thankful amazement about everything that you have in mind for all of us, that you have already decided regarding all of us, and that you have already done for all of us! Amen.

4 Lord, our God and Father, give to many, to all, and to us as well, that we may celebrate Christmas like this: that in complete thankfulness, utter humility, and then complete joy and confidence we may come to the one whom you have sent, and in whom you yourself have come to us. Clean out the many things in us that, now that the hour has come, have become impossible for us, can no longer belong to us, may, must, and will fall away from us, by virtue of your beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, entering into our midst and creating order.

Have mercy also on all of those who either do not yet or do not fully know you and your kingdom, who perhaps once knew everything and have either forgotten, misunderstood, or even denied it! Have mercy on all of humankind, who today are once again especially plagued, threatened, and haunted by so much foolishness! Enlighten the thoughts of those in both the East and the West who are in power and who, as appears to be the

case, are today in complete confusion and despair! Give the rulers and representatives of the people, the judges, teachers, and bureaucrats, give even the newspaper reporters in our homeland, the insight and sobriety that are necessary for their responsible work! Place the right, necessary, and helpful words on the lips of those who have to preach during this Christmas season, and open then also the ears and hearts of those who hear them! Comfort and encourage those who are sick, both in body and spirit, in the hospitals, as well as the prisoners, and those who are distressed, abandoned, or despairing! Help them with what alone can truly help them and all of us: the clarity of your Word and the quiet work of your Holy Spirit.

We thank you that we are permitted to know that we do not pray and will never pray to you in vain. We thank you that you have let your light rise, that it shines in the darkness, and that the darkness will not overcome it. We thank you that you are our God, and that we may be your people. Amen.