



foreword by SALLY LLOYD-JONES

PRAYING
THE
MESSAGE
OF
JESUS

FEATURING
THE MESSAGE

*a year of thoughts and prayers
from the Gospels*

EUGENE H. PETERSON

*Previously published as *A Year with Jesus**

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Praying the Message of Jesus: A Year of Thoughts and Prayers from the Gospels

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FOREWORD

One of my favorite stories in the Bible happens after the Resurrection.

It's early in the morning, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus' friends are still out on their boat. They have been working all through the night, doing the job they know best—fishing. But even though they are expert fishermen, they have caught nothing. They must be exhausted and losing heart.

And just as the sun starts to rise, they see, through the mist on the lake, a single figure on the shore. They strain to see who it is.

“Friends,” the man calls to them. “Do you have any food? Any fish?”

“No,” they call back. “All night—and nothing!”

“Try the other side of the boat,” the man directs them.

They do what he says, and immediately their nets are creaking and straining and groaning and close to bursting—and filled with more fish than they could ever hope to haul ashore.

And then a thought breaks in on their minds, just as the sunrise had broken in on their long, dark night. They know who it is.

Something this wonderful could only come from him.

“Jesus!” they cry, and start rowing as fast as they can to shore.

But the boat isn't going fast enough for Peter, so he drops everything and plunges into the water to get to Jesus.

Jesus already has the charcoal fire ready, and some fish and bread. He asks them to bring the fish they've just caught.

And then Jesus cooks for his friends—breakfast on the beach!

“Come on, friends,” he says. “Breakfast is ready!”

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“Breakfast is ready!” Those have to be three of the most wonderful words we can hear. I think they might just as well be “I love you.”

Don’t you wish you could have had breakfast on the beach with Jesus? I’ve always thought that must have been the most delicious breakfast ever in the History of All Breakfasts!

But what if someone told you that right now, today, you could do just that? Have breakfast with Jesus? What would you do?

Drop everything, like Peter!

It seems to me that this book is an invitation to do just that—to spend time with Jesus, to have breakfast with him. To come to him in the middle of our weary, disappointed lives. To put down our nets, stop our work, come to shore, and rest. To let Jesus feed us, strengthen us, direct us.

As we read these passages, we are in the company of this same Jesus.

This same Jesus takes us by the hand and guides us “into all the truth there is” (John 16:13). He directs our work, and it is transformed—just by his being there, just by his presence. And all our lives become “careless in the care of God” (Matthew 6:26).

In Eugene, we have a trusted companion as we embark on this journey. I must confess that I’m a Eugene Peterson groupie. I have read nearly every one of his books. I will read anything he writes. I will go wherever he speaks. Why? Because in his words, I hear the Word. He helps me see Jesus.

Eugene is a poet and a pastor. He loves words like a poet. He loves the Word, the Scriptures, as a theologian. And he loves the Word, Jesus, as a lover and a friend.

As Eugene wrote, “Reading of Jesus turns into praying with Jesus, keeping his delightful company as lover and friend.”

In these pages, we can rest in the truth that prayer is not a subject to study or a technique to learn but is instead a life to live with our best friend and lover, who has come to live among us and to whom we can now say, “Nothing I experience is foreign to you, and nothing I feel is strange to you.”

The Word, which made the heavens and the earth, calls us by name. The Word, which stilled a storm, healed the lame, and raised the dead, cooks breakfast for us.

What if we were to step out of our busy lives for a moment and let “the sunrise appearance of Jesus” break in upon us?

It’s an incredible invitation.

Come on, friends. Breakfast is ready!

Sally Lloyd-Jones
Author of The Jesus Storybook Bible

A YEAR WITH JESUS

The goal of spending a year with Jesus is to learn how to pray. Our prayers do not start with us. They start with Jesus. Before we ever open our mouths in prayer, Jesus is praying for us. Despite much talk to the contrary, there are no secrets to living the Christian life. No prerequisite attitudes. No conditions more or less favorable to pursuing the Way. Anyone can do this, from any place, starting at any time. But it is only possible through prayer. We can only pray our lives into the way of following Jesus.

Prayer provides the primary language for everything that takes place in the way of Jesus. If we go to a shopping mall in North America, we speak English to get what we want. If we go to a restaurant in France, we speak French to order our meal. If we travel to Greece, we speak Greek to find our way to the Acropolis. And when we become personally involved with Jesus, we pray. We pray because it is the only language we have for speaking to the God revealed in Jesus. It is also the only language we have for listening to the commands and blessings and guidance that God provides in Jesus. God is nothing if not personal. Both God and we humans are most personal, most characteristically our unique selves, in our use of language. The language between God and us is called prayer.

What I want to insist on is that prayer is not something added on to the Christian life (or any life, for that matter). We cannot specialize in prayer any more than we can specialize in life. We cannot abstract prayer from our living, or isolate instances of prayer and study them under laboratory conditions. It is the language in which our lives are lived out, nurtured, developed, revealed, and informed. The language in which we believe, love, explore, seek, and find. There are no shortcuts or detours: Prayer is the cradle language among all those who are “born anew” and grow up to follow Jesus.

Prayer is a way of living. It is not a subject to be studied. It is not a technique to be learned. It is a life lived in response to God. We do not learn *about* prayer, we learn *to* pray; and the prayer, as it turns out, is never *just* prayer, but involves every dimension of our lives—eating, drinking, loving, working, walking, reading, and singing. The way we follow Jesus must be internalized and embodied. That is what prayer does, gets Jesus inside us, gets his Spirit into our muscles and reflexes. There is no other way. Judas followed Jesus with his feet all over Palestine, but it never got inside him. Peter listened with his ears to everything Jesus said and spoke with his mouth the deepest truth about Jesus (“You’re the Christ”), but when he cut off the ear of Malchus in Gethsemane, we know that he hadn’t learned that way of life from Jesus (see Matthew 16:16; John 18:10).

But because in our secularized society prayer is often associated with what people of “spiritual” interests pursue or with formal acts conducted by professional leaders, it is necessary from time to time to call attention to the fact that prayer is the street language that we use with Jesus as he walks the streets with us. We can’t put off prayer until we “get good at it.” It is the only language available to us as we bring our unique and particular selves, “just as we are without one plea,” into daily, hourly conversation with God, who comes “just as he is” in Jesus.¹

Following Jesus necessarily means getting his words and ways into our everyday lives. It is not enough simply to recognize and approve his ways and get started in the right direction. Everything about Jesus is there to be embraced by our imaginations and assimilated into our habits—*believed* and *lived*. This takes place only as we *pray* while reading the story of Jesus, pray what we see Jesus doing, pray what we hear Jesus saying, pray the questions we have, pray the commands and promises and invitations that come to us in this story, pray the difficulties we encounter on the way.

Jesus’ praying was never something apart from his living. We cannot isolate his praying from his living. His whole life is the context for understanding and then participating in his praying. It is the same with us: Our entire lives provide circumstances and stuff for our prayers.

Jesus’ life cannot be imposed from without. It cannot be copied. It must be shaped from within. This shaping takes place in prayer. The practice of prayer is the primary way by which the life of Jesus comes to permeate

our entire lives so that we walk spontaneously and speak rhythmically in the fluidity and fluency of holiness. Left to ourselves we are fragmented and distracted people, jerky and spasmodic. Sin does that to us. The more object-like, the more thing-like, the more impersonal we become, the more disengaged we are from our God-created humanity and from the God-created world around us. Prayer, as the Spirit prays within us (and he most certainly does, whether we are aware of it or not—see Romans 8:19-26), recovers our original place in creation so that we can live robustly in the world. Prayer in conversation with Jesus involves us firsthand in the grand reconciliation going on in Christ, setting us free for relational intimacies with family and friends, the heavens above us, and the earth under our feet (see Colossians 1:15-23). When we embrace the companionship of the praying Jesus, “Everything becomes a You and nothing remains an It.”²

We pray with Jesus; Jesus prays with us. Day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month, Jesus—God with us—is prayed into the details of our lives, and God’s salvation is formed in us.

In order to provide this text for your prayers and Jesus’ prayers—a true conversation—I have taken the stories and words of Jesus from the Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint John and spread them across a 365-day sequence of reading, reflection, and prayer. I interrupt Matthew two chapters from the end in order to let John provide the ending, and a most magnificent ending it is. My intent is that your reading of Jesus turns into praying with Jesus, keeping his delightful company as lover and friend.

JANUARY 1

Family Tree

The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's son, Abraham's son.

MATTHEW 1:1

Three names mark key points in God's salvation work: Abraham, father of the faithful; David, the man after God's own heart; Jesus, the Son of God, who summed up Abraham and David and revealed all that God is for us.

Why are ancestors important?

You come, Jesus, out of a history thick with names. Names—not dates, not events—signal the junctures in which you single out me and others for personal love and responsibility. Named, I now name your name in trust and gratefulness: Jesus. Amen.

. . . Who Gave Birth to Jesus

Abraham had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob, Jacob had Judah and his brothers, Judah had Perez and Zerah (the mother was Tamar), Perez had Hezron, Hezron had Aram, Aram had Amminadab, Amminadab had Nahshon . . . Eliud had Eleazar, Eleazar had Matthan, Matthan had Jacob, Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband, the Mary who gave birth to Jesus, the Jesus who was called Christ. There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, and yet another fourteen from the Babylonian exile to Christ. MATTHEW 1:2-4, 15-17

The biblical fondness for genealogical lists is not dull obscurantism, it is an insistence on the primacy and continuity of people. Each name is a burnished link connecting God's promises to his fulfillments in the chain of people who are the story of God's mercy.

Which of these names stands out for you?

Some of these names I don't recognize at all, God. And that is reassuring! I don't have to be an Abraham or a David to be included in this salvation litany. My ordinariness is as essential as another's extraordinariness. Thank you. Amen.

By Tamar

Judah had Perez and Zerah (the mother was Tamar), Perez had Hezron, Hezron had Aram . . . Salmon had Boaz (his mother was Rahab), Boaz had Obed (Ruth was the mother), Obed had Jesse, Jesse had David, and David became king. David had Solomon (Uriah's wife was the mother). MATTHEW 1:3, 5-6

Four names in the list are a surprise: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba). Each of these names represents a person who was exploited, or downtrodden, or an outsider—the misused, the immoral, the foreign. Jesus' genealogy doesn't prove racial or moral purity, but redemptive range. God's salvation work is inclusive, not exclusive.

What do you know of each of these women?

Do I have enough confidence, Lord, in your inventive and incorporative will, to believe that you will use unattractive, immoral, and unlovely people as well as the glamorous and virtuous and admirable? That is hard to believe, but the evidence is impressive. Help my unbelief. Amen.

Forty-Two Generations

Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband, the Mary who gave birth to Jesus, the Jesus who was called Christ. There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, and yet another fourteen from the Babylonian exile to Christ.

MATTHEW 1:16-17

The list concludes with a name (Jesus) plus a title (Christ). The forty-two generations conclude with Jesus, who is given the title Christ (in Hebrew, Messiah), the person whom God anoints to accomplish our salvation. The final name is simultaneously a human life and a divine work.

What does the name Jesus Christ mean to you?

I see, Father, that you do not simply permit names to accumulate at random, but that you shape lives. There is a design, and there is a goal. Enter my earth-conditioned existence and shape eternity in me. Amen.

The Birth of Jesus

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.)

MATTHEW 1:18

There is a combination of old and new in this birth story: traditional angels, visions, prophecies; there is also the miraculously innovative divine Spirit. There are historical data; there is also virginal conception.

Why is the virgin birth significant?

I am not satisfied with reading about your birth, Lord, I want to be in on it. Take the ancient history of my childhood and religion and put it to use. Make the birth of Christ as vivid and actual in me as it was in Mary. Amen.

Joseph, a Noble Man

Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant."

MATTHEW 1:19-20

Joseph thought that "noble" involved doing the proper thing; he was about to find out that it was also being the right person. The word "noble" changes meaning in this event, a change from loyalty to a moral tradition to obedience to a divine person. Faith crowds out duty and wisdom as the dynamic of the "noble man."

How would you describe a noble person?

Father, there is no way I can respond appropriately to your presence unless you break into my imagination in a dream. I will pray expectantly, open to your vision. How else will I receive guidance for becoming a noble person? Amen.

Name Him Jesus

“She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.” This would bring the prophet’s embryonic sermon to full term.

MATTHEW 1:21-22

Mary’s work was giving birth; Joseph’s work was naming. Much attention has been given, appropriately enough, to Mary. But why the avoidance of Joseph? He was set apart for the priestly-poetic task of naming a character and defining a destiny.

What does the name Jesus mean?

Jesus, your name defines the gospel: not a model that I can admire and follow, but a Savior entering the world of my troubled heart and doing something—saving me. Amen.

The Prophet's Embryonic Sermon

This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term: "Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for 'God is with us')."

MATTHEW 1:22-23

A deep, contrapuntal resonance reverberates between Isaiah's prophecy and Mary's pregnancy. Half-formed expectations take shape embryonically. Obscurely imagined messianic hopes get a character and a name.

Read and compare Isaiah 7:1-14.

There are promises and longings out of my past, my infancy and childhood, O God, that you fulfill in the birth of Jesus in my life. Complete the fulfillment, being with me in your fullness. Amen.

He Did . . .

Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

MATTHEW 1:24-25

It is one thing to have dreams, another thing to act on them. Joseph both dreamed and acted—a perfect model of obedience. He affirmed the action of the Holy Spirit in his closest personal relationship, he refrained from interfering in the divine process, and he did what he was told.

Why is Joseph important in your life?

When I observe the action of this mature, free man, Lord—the reckless involvement, the disciplined restraint, the plain obedience, and all of it woven together in one coherent righteous action—I know that I, too, can live in daring obedience before you. Amen.

Jesus/Herod

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. MATTHEW 2:1

The two names, Jesus and Herod, are in contrast. The general (“during Herod’s kingship”) gives way to the particular (“Jesus was born”). Kingship comes into focus. Rule is personalized. Geography and politics slip into mere background as Jesus centers all history.

What are you most interested in?

God, when I see how kings and nations slip into the shadows at Jesus’ birth, I see that I will do well not to become engrossed in either of them. It will not be by excavating Bethlehem or by analyzing Herod, but by worshiping you that my life will find center and purpose. Amen.