

Epigraph

The Lord knows the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

PSALM 1:6

The way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

JESUS (MATTHEW 7:14)

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, You must go by
a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

T. S. ELIOT

2. Way

The text that teaches us to pray doesn't begin with prayer. We are not ready. We are wrapped up in ourselves. We are knocked around by the world. The ways in which we are used to going about our business, using the language, dealing with our neighbors, and thinking about God don't exactly disqualify us from prayer, but neither do they help much.

The nonpraying world is a pushing, shoving, demanding world. Voices within and without harass, insisting that we look at this picture, read this headline, listen to this appeal, feel this guilt, touch this charm. It is asking too much that we move from this high-stimulus world into the quiet concentrations of prayer without an adequate transition.

The nonpraying world is also an intimidating world. We wake each day to a world noisy with braggadocio, violent with guns, arrogant with money. What use is prayer in the face of governments, armies, and millionaires? What motivation can we muster to pray when all the obvious power is already allocated to heads of state and barons of industry?

In prayer we intend to leave the world of anxieties and enter a world of wonder. We decide to leave an ego-centered world and enter a God-centered world. We will to leave a world of problems and enter a world of mystery. But it is not easy. We are used to anxieties, egos, and problems; we are not used to wonder, God, and mystery.

Pre-Prayer

Psalms 1 and 2 pave the way. They get us ready to pray. The Psalms are an edited book. All these prayers were collected and arranged at one point in Israel's history, and then Psalms 1 and 2 set as an entrance to them, pillars flanking the way into prayer. We are not unceremoniously dumped into the world of prayer, we are courteously led across an ample porch, a way that provides space and means by which we are adjusted to the realities of prayer. *Way* is a significant word in the first two Psalms.

Psalms 1 and 2 are a pair, working together to put our feet on the path that goes from the nonpraying world in which we are habitually distracted and intimidated, into the praying world where we come to attention and practice adoration. For prayer is not only a matter of saying the right sort of words to the right kind of God. Our *being* is involved, the *way* we are.

Psalms 1 and 2 are pre-prayer, getting us ready, making us adequate for prayer. We never get past needing this help. We hunger and thirst for God, but our noblest appetites are debased by our own fears and lusts and the stamp the culture presses upon us. Unless we have help out of ourselves, our prayers will only be verbal and emotional projections from our nonpraying world. "Knowing demands the organ fitted to the object."¹ We have well-developed organs fit for finding a bargain, driving Subarus, and reading *Huckleberry Finn*; our "organs" for knowing God are not so well exercised. Preparation of the pray-er, necessarily precedes the act of praying. The old wisdom in this matter is: "Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the one receiving it."² Psalms 1 and 2 put us in the way (mode) of prayer. Psalm 1 is the way from intimidation to adoration.

The first word of the first psalm, *blessed*, sets the tone: happy, fortunate, lucky with holy luck. The second psalm uses the same word at its finish. Jesus took this *blessed* ("seized" is more like it), used it as the first word in his most famous ser-

mon, and then elaborated it into an octave, an eight-line stanza (Matthew 5:3–10).

Blessed is a directional antenna, a mind-set for picking up signals we would otherwise miss. We get ready to pray. What are we getting into? We are on the outskirts of his ways, about to enter the deep interiors. What is the appropriate attitude before this unknown? Apprehension will make us cautious, crippled for taking risks, if risks need to be taken. Stoic dutifulness will make us heavy-footed, clumsy in the dance, if a dance is scheduled. The *blessed* arouses expectation, a readiness for a more that is also a good. We don't know the contents of the *blessed*, or the difficulties—how could we, we are not there yet?—but we sense that we are entering a way on which we will become more our true selves, not less, not other. The anticipation of being blessed works changes in us that make us capable of being blessed.

Coming to Attention: Psalm 1

Two things are prominent in Psalm 1: an action and an image. Torah-meditation is the action; a transplanted tree is the image.

Torah (law) is God's words that hit the target of the human condition. The noun *torah* comes from a verb, *yarah*, that means to throw something, a javelin, say, so that it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is *torah*. In living speech, words are javelins hurled from one mind into another. The javelin word goes out of one person and pierces another. Not all words are javelins; some are only tin cans, carrying information from one place to another. But God's word has this aimed, intentional, personal nature. When we are spoken to this way, piercingly and penetratingly, we are not the same. These words get inside us and work their meaning in us.³

As we prepare to pray, to answer the words God addresses to us, we learn that all of God's words have this characteristic:

they are *torah* and we are the target. God's word is not a reference book in a library that we pull off the shelf when we want information. There is nothing inert or bookish in these words. God's words, creating and saving words every one, hit us where we live.

The moment we know this, that God speaks to us, delight is spontaneous. "The psalms are the liturgy for those whose concern and delight is the torah of the Lord".⁴ These are not words that we laboriously but impersonally study, as if for an exam. These are not words that we anxiously scan lest we inadvertently transgress a boundary or break a protocol. These are words we *take* in—words designed for shaping new life in us, feeding the energies of salvation. This delight develops into meditation, torah-meditation. Meditate (*hagah*) is a bodily action; it involves murmuring and mumbling words, taking a kind of physical pleasure in making the sounds of the words, getting the *feel* of the meaning as the syllables are shaped by larynx and tongue and lips.⁵ Isaiah used this word "meditate" for the sounds that a lion makes over its prey (Isa. 31:4). A lion over its catch and a person over the torah act similarly. They purr and growl in pleasurable anticipation of taking in what will make them more themselves, strong, lithe, swift: "I will run in the way of thy commandments when thou enlargest my understanding!" (Ps. 119:32).

This is quite different from merely reading God's word, or thinking about it. This is not so much an intellectual process, figuring out meanings, as it is a physical process, hearing and rehearsing these words as we sound them again, letting the sounds sink into our muscles and bones. Meditation is mastication.

A transplanted tree provides the image that locates us in the way of prayer.⁶ Letting the psalm words carry their most natural meaning, "a tree planted by streams of water" is "a tree transplanted alongside irrigation canals." Israel, during the

time that the psalms were collected and made into its prayer book, was in Babylonian exile. Babylon was flat and featureless. A single river flowed through the country. The Babylonians had cut a network of irrigation canals across the land, multiplying the square miles of fertility. Transplanted to the banks of these irrigation ditches the Israelites—refugees under a merciless sun—thought they were in the worst possible place for prayer. Solomon’s splendid temple was a pile of ruins back in Jerusalem. They didn’t think they could pray. One of them composed a song, a kind of “Babylonian blues” that soon everyone was singing: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137). They didn’t think they could. But they did. My, how they did it! How did they do it? By letting God’s word enter their lives again, there in exile, and letting his address pull answers out of them. They immersed themselves in torah-meditation: before they knew it they were praying. They were trees. Transplanted to Babylon they put down roots, put out leaves, and produced fruit. We all suppose that we could pray, or pray better, if we were in the right place. We put off praying until we are where we think we should be, or want to be. We let our fantasies or our circumstances distract us from attending to the word of God that is aimed right where we are, and invites our answers from that spot.

We get ourselves ready to pray by looking at a tree, a transplanted tree, and seeing ourselves in it. “Before we can get to the great idea of True, an emotionally charged symbolic construct for which innumerable women and men have died, we must stare thoughtfully and long at a tree, Old English *Treow*, which gives us the word true (*Treow*), the ‘deeply rooted idea.’”⁷

Comprehension of the invisible begins in the visible. Praying to God begins by looking at a tree. The deepest relationship of which we are capable has its origin in the everyday experience of taking a good look at what is in everybody’s backyard.

We are not launched into the life of prayer by making ourselves more heavenly, but by immersing ourselves in the earthy: not by formulating abstractions such as goodness, beauty, or even God, but by attending to trees and tree toads, mountains and mosquitoes.

We come to the prayer book of the Bible to get training in prayer and the first directive is: “Go find yourself a tree, sit down in front of it, look at it long and thoughtfully.” Prayer begins not with what we don’t see, but with what we do see. Prayer begins in the senses, in the body, in geography, in botany.

Abstraction is an enemy to prayer. Beautiful ideas are an enemy to prayer. Fine thoughts are an enemy to prayer. Authentic prayer begins when we stub our toes on a rock, get drenched in a rainstorm, get slapped in the face by an enemy—or run into the tree that has been in our path for so long that we have ceased to see it, and now stand back, in bruised and wondering awe before it.

Torah-meditation is the action that moves us away from distracting words that push us this way and that; these words pull us into attentiveness. The transplanted tree is the image that focuses our distracted will, the will that is ever restlessly looking for and trying out the “right” conditions for prayer. The tree claims our attention and says, “Put your roots down *here*.”

Entering into Adoration: Psalm 2

The verb that dominates the action of Psalm 1, meditate (*hagah*), is picked up in Psalm 2, but used in a context that requires the translation, “plot.” “Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples *plot* in vain?” “Meditate” in Psalm 1 and “plot” in Psalm 2 are the same verb. And it is the same action: a murmuring, absorbed, ruminative interest over the word of God, realizing that this is *the* important word, the word that

determines all existence. But while Psalm 1 directs us to approach this word with delight, receiving it as life-giving, Psalm 2 shows people plotting against this word, devising schemes for getting rid of it so that they can be free of all God-interference in their lives. These people see God's words not as javelins penetrating their lives with truth, but as chains that restrict their freedom. They put their minds together to rid themselves of this word so that their words can rule.

The people who do this appear impressive: they are both numerous (nations and peoples) and prominent (kings and rulers). A lot of people reject the word of God; they not only reject it, they turn their rejection into a world power. These people command most of the armies of the world, direct the advances of science, run school systems, preside over governments, and rule in the marketplaces. If these people are in active conspiracy against the rule of God, what difference can prayer make? What chance does mere "tree" meditating, have when the movers and shakers of the earth are conspiratorially aligned against it?

Intimidation is as fatal to prayer as distraction. If we are intimidated, we will forfeit the entire world of culture and politics, of business and science to those "who set themselves. . . against the Lord."

What is at issue here is size: we require an act of imagination that enables us to see that the world of God is *large*—far larger than the worlds of kings and princes, prime ministers and presidents, far larger than the worlds reported by newspaper and television, far larger than the world described in big books by nuclear physicists and military historians. We need a way to imagine—to *see*—that the world of God's ruling word is not an afterthought to the worlds of the stock exchange, the rocket launching, and summit diplomacy, but itself contains them.

Far more is involved here than simply asserting God's sover-

eignty. We need a way, a convincing, usable, accessible tool for realizing the largeness of God in the midst of the competing bigness of the world. If we fail here, prayer will be stunted; we will pray huddled and cowering. Our prayers will whimper.

Psalm 2 answers our need by presenting Messiah. Messiah is God's person in history. God is not exclusively in the business of dealing with souls, he is also active in cities. Messiah is God's invasion of the secular, his entry into the world where people go to school, go to work, go to war, go to Chicago. He enters—and he enters *in person*. His word is not only what we meditate in the scriptures, it takes shape in history and we see it in action in a person.

This strikes many as implausible, that God, in order to develop within us a sense of the immensity of his rule, presents us with a human being with an ordinary name (Saul, David, Zerubbabel), in an unpretentious place (Zion), calls him "my son," and gives him unspiritual jobs like building roads, protecting cities, and dealing with foreign emissaries.

Objections are immediate and outraged: "But we grew up with him; we know his brothers and sisters; we sat across the aisle from him in the second grade and played ball with him in Little League. Wouldn't it be better to put the brash world in its place by promulgating huge resolutions, by practicing large thoughts—truth, love, justice—and by sheer force of thinking overwhelm the vulgarity of the rulers? Or, if something visible is required, give directions for a statue that will humble the Sphinx, or provide blueprints for a temple that will fill a prairie?"

But nothing like that was done in Israel. Instead, people were selected and marked by pouring a flask of oil on their heads as representatives of God's rule, and so made messiahs (anointed ones). Israel was surrounded by world powers that boasted impressive temples, ruthless armies, Brobdingnagian statues, and extensive libraries. But when God wanted to show

them how his rule was greater than anything that they saw around them, he directed that men be taken from local families and anointed. He trained them to look at the ordinary and the personal as the places where he initiated his rule and established his sovereignty. The people were turned away from trembling in awe or fear before the world's so-called mighty, they were patiently taught to see God working in and through messiah, an anointed one.

The extraordinary thing about this implausible method is that it works, at least for those who enter the way of prayer. Centuries of training in observing God's invasion of the world by messiah reached a conclusion when Jesus of Nazareth was declared Messiah (in Greek, *Christos*, "anointed one"). This Messiah was as implausible as the rest: "Is not this the son of Joseph?" (John 1:46). "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" (John 6:42). But it was true: God invaded history. In Jesus, Christians believe, the entrance was not only into history but into flesh, and the presence of God was not only representative but thoroughgoing. Jesus was the complete Messiah of which the earlier messiahs had been approximations. But the *method* was the same: God entered history in a human person and exercised his rule from that unassuming position in that unadorned person.

Two details encourage the expansion of the messianic imagination into adequacy. One shows God laughing at the world's rulers: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision" (Psalm 2:4). Laughter restores perspective. There is such a thing as taking the world's arrogance too seriously. God laughs. We join him. In the laughter, every high-flown pretension is seen as silly posturing.

The other detail is a call to adoration: "Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet (Psalm 2:11)". We see the rulers needing a ruler, the kings needing a king. Their world is too small, the kingdoms over which they rule, trying to ex-

clude God, too small. Their world is also dangerous. If they persist, they will be destroyed: "Therefore, O Kings, be wise: be warned" (Psalm 2:10). The trembling that reduces them to size opens them up to God's size. They need a larger world. The way to the larger world is through adoring reverence before the one who is more than they are.

This is not a sovereignty *imposed* on history or humans; it *invades*. It begins on the inside, not the outside. Those who embrace this way discover in the life of prayer that follows that the "inside is bigger than the outside."⁸

There is much yet to learn about how this Messiah works, and many misunderstandings to be worked through, but that is not the business of Psalm 2. That will come in its time in the practice of prayer and maturing in the faith. The work of Psalm 2 is to provide access to largeness, and thereby to rehabilitate the intimidated imagination so that it can grasp the enormous range of the word of God.

The Tree and the Messiah

The Hebrews arranged the scriptures into three sections: *Torah* (law) is the primary word of God; *Prophets* (including the historical books) shows God's word at work in geography and history; *Writings* (led by the Psalms) shape our response to God's word through the practice of prayer in the life of faith. God's word is surging and rich. Hundreds of years of words are in it—told in stories, preached in sermons, preserved in genealogies, interpreted in histories. Every syllable is a gem. Somehow or other, all those sharp, quick, and personal words must be heard and answered. Not a nuance must be lost. Psalms 1 and 2 work as funnels, directing all the *Torah* (through Psalm 1) and all the *Prophets* (through Psalm 2) into the way of prayer, that is, into the Psalms, where we take our place to get our lives trained by prayer "into an adequate answer to God's word."⁹

Psalm 1 is quiet, gathering our distracted lives into an act of supreme attention. Psalm 2 is vigorous, countering the bullying world that intimidates us into hiding. By means of Psalm 1 we become a tree, putting down roots into the soil and streams of Torah, collected and recollected before God's word. By means

of Psalm 2 we observe Messiah, God personally involved in this world, often incognito, but *here*, and ruling. Psalm 1 concentrates our energies into listening attention. Psalm 2 expands our vision to take in the messianic revelation. At attention and in adoration, we are ready to pray.