

## A Prayer That Needed Revising

Merrill Litchfield

**Read: Matthew 6:5-15 “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Matthew 6: 7-8**

I've told this story once before (though not in a devotional), about when my father's life was ending. He had undergone surgery, fairly successfully, but in the recovery room, his cardiac history caught up with him. He suffered a heart attack and lingered several days before passing. I was the only one of my family not there with him (in Alpena, Michigan), but circumstances seemed to dictate I remain here. Prayer was about the only avenue open to me, so I tried to temporize as best I could: “Lord, I know everybody has to die sometime. But does it have to be now for Dad?”

Without missing a single beat, the answer came back at once: “When did you have in mind?” And I was caught—caught like the kid with his hand in the cookie jar. I had no time in mind, nor even any excuse that Dad might have been hoping for. Dad had been retired from preaching for about eight years, time enough for God to provide that “home of his own” that Dad had wished for while preaching all those years out of other peoples' parsonages. All six of us boys had married and pretty well established our families. There was even a great-grandchild. What could I tell God that Dad would like to hang around to see?

Perhaps that instant of putting me on the spot was God's intention, to reveal to me the carelessness of that un-thought-out prayer. Because it became instantly clear to me that there was a word that I didn't dare speak, or even think: “Never.” Not even I had enough brass to let that word come out before God (not that He didn't know it while I pretended not to say it). And so, having seen it in God's light, I did the only thing I could: I laid it down in willing sacrifice. And didn't complain again about how much time Dad was given. I mentioned his cardiac history: he had his first MI (that's “myocardial infarction,” not an abbreviation for Michigan) at age 48, when I was a junior in high school; dying at 73 was not really a cause for complaint (other than our usual whine that we have to die at all).

As I think about this now, it amazes me that God could have, but did not, answer my question: “Yes, 'cuz I said so.” But He seems to have wanted me to recognize what it was I was asking for: that, at the very least, I would tailor my asking to His will, rather than simply whimper as I (and my wishes) got run over by the facts. And I bless, and thank, my Teacher, Who wanted me to learn, because He hadn't yet given up on loving me.

**Prayer: Lord, Giver of both life and Eternal Life, thank You for Your many, and wonderful, gifts. Thank You for the many, and needed, lessons You teach us, so we can love what You are doing, even if it takes us a while to figure it out. Amen.**

## The Efficacy of Prayer

Merrill Litchfield

**Read: Matthew 6:5-14** “Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.”  
**Matthew 6:6 The Message**

**Consider: *The Efficacy of Prayer*, essay by C. S. Lewis, in the book *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*.**

As I’ve considered how much grace we were given as my wife coasted downhill to her death, some phrases from this essay have jumped out in my memory, demanding attention. Though the entire essay is well worthwhile, let me quote from near the end:

*It would be even worse to think of those who get what they pray for as a sort of court favorites, people who have influence with the throne. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that. And I dare not leave out the hard saying which I once heard from an experienced Christian: “I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning: before conversion, or soon after it. As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent, they become more unmistakable, more emphatic.”*

*Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, “Why hast Thou forsaken me?” When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. There is a mystery here which, even if I had the power, I might not have the courage to explore. Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend more desperate posts in the great battle.*

The more I think about how much grace we (Barb, myself, our adult children) were given, the more I’m sure I owe an impossible debt of gratitude to God, the size of which makes all the oceans in the world, in all of their mysterious depth and uncountable gallonage, seem like a mere splash on a countertop. All I’m sure of is I had no right to ask for any of that mercy, no reason to expect God to give it, beyond His own giving nature. “I AM who I AM,” He said. And He does what He does, for His own reasons. All I can do is praise Him.

**Prayer: Thank You, Giving, Loving Lord, for all of Your many gifts to us, Your children. Your wonders are greater than Your Creation, for no matter how much we learn, at each turn we are still more amazed. Thank You for Your mercy, which reaches to all Your children, even me. Amen.**

## The Good Old Days

Merrill Litchfield

**Read: Job 29:1-6 (or all the way to v. 25, if you have the time).**

As we prepared to celebrate Barb's life in her visitation, one of the things I got to do was dig back through many photo albums (and, from before we got *that* organized, boxes of photos). It was a delight for me, re-visiting many happy occasions, and giving thanks for them. When I had chosen just about a hundred pix, I simply stopped. The abundant life we were so graciously given was there to be seen, for those who might be looking; adding more pix would not convince those who might have considered them to be mere bragging on our part, rather than testimony to God's generosity to us.

I remember seeing a devotional once which spoke poorly of keeping photos; the writer claimed the photo owner kept them in order to prove to his own satisfaction that he had had a happy life, as a hedge against the medical dysfunctions which he guessed to be his coming lot. Perhaps old photos, as well as the times and people they commemorate, can be made into an idol. I hope I haven't. When John Claypool preached the fourth sermon in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* (using the whole of the Book of Job, not just one chapter), I liked his conclusion much better: "The God Who was in charge of The Good Old Days is also in charge of the good new days." And, while I might look at the story of Job's restored fortunes with a touch of jaundice in my eye, believing the story as told to be a tad more literary than likely, nonetheless, I'm still being given small joys from day to day (as well as small causes for tears, which can praise Him, as well). He is still my Good Shepherd. Goodness and mercy still daily attend me.

**Prayer: Lord of all love, thank You! You know everything there is to know about me, and yet You still love me. Thank You for Your many mercies; may they help sustain me when things that demand endurance also arrive, that in all things You may be praised. Amen.**

## A Shout Out to God

Gaye Lynn Loufek

**“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Proverbs 3:5-6 ESV**

When our children were little, we found ourselves in a very typical young parent dilemma; Sunday mornings were utter chaos and trying to get all of us out of the house and to church on time was next to impossible.

Many Sundays, I found myself racing out the door, alone, because one of the babies had gotten sick all over the outfit we'd put on and there wasn't time to change it. Someone hadn't finished breakfast and was crying at the table because this happened to be the *one* day that being part of the “clean plate club” was of utmost importance. We couldn't find one shoe; the pacifier was lost: we had exactly enough time to leave the house and drive the 25 minutes to church but not enough time to get coats on and secure people in car seats. You get the picture!

Repeatedly, I would drive to church praying all along the way, “God, I really tried this morning. Having ‘church’ be a priority in our lives is truly a priority, BUT, if you want me to raise my family in church, I NEED YOUR HELP!” This happened Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. I was truly perplexed why God wasn't making it easier for me. To top it off, the Sundays I would manage to get us all to church and we'd take the kids into worship, some sweet, well-meaning people would remind us that “there is a nursery.” (Our kids LOVED to “sing” as babies the minute the organ started playing.)

God's timing seemed not to coincide with my sense of urgency. I really didn't like going to church alone, and I couldn't make it happen any other way. Secretly, I think I was hoping God would just wave a magic wand and make it all work out. Much like the scripture in Matthew 4: 1-11 when Jesus is tempted, it wasn't that God wasn't “doing” in my life, it was that the temptation to “give up” was so strong, I couldn't see a way out.

Well, fast forward a short time—God did what God does: He made his plan shine loud and clear. The kids grew to be more independent, we found a new church in our new town, and ultimately were transferred to the Chicago area and found Grace. And the rest, you might say, is history.

For all of the years I thought I might be the only one in our household who made it to worship on Sunday, volunteered as a lay person, served on mission, God was working on His plan, in His timing.

I'm not certain if He just didn't want to hear me screaming anymore or if He was excited that I felt the need to shout from the mountaintops. Whatever the case, what continues to bring me hope is that even when I don't see a way out, God is listening, seeing, seeking me, working, and welcoming me into His world—right where I want to belong.

## Scout's Honor

### Ray Seidlitz

One of the questions to ponder for this year's booklet of Lenten devotions was "Have you ever tried to 'broker a deal' with God? *'If you just let this happen, I'll do this...'*"

Well, I have to admit that I have kind of a "deal" with God that I learned from a friend of mine: I like to think God and I have a little arrangement. If He wakes me up to see another day, I promise to try and be better than I was yesterday.

Notice I said "try." I certainly don't always succeed in fulfilling my part of the bargain. But as a guideline for doing this, I looked back to when I was much younger as a Boy Scout. I remember the Scout Law and decided it was a good set of goals which could still apply to daily living.

### Scout Law

**Trustworthy** - Tell the truth and keep promises.

**Loyal** - Show that you care about your family, friends, and country.

**Helpful** - Volunteer to help others without expecting a reward.

**Friendly** - Be a friend to everyone, even people who are very different from you.

**Courteous** - Be polite to everyone and always use good manners.

**Kind** - Treat others as you want to be treated.

**Obedient** - Obey the laws of your community and country.

**Cheerful** - Look for the bright side of life. Cheerfully do tasks that come your way. Try to help others be happy.

**Thrifty** - Work to pay your own way. Try not to be wasteful. Use time, food, and natural resources wisely.

**Brave** - Face difficult situations even when you feel afraid. Do what you think is right despite what others might be doing or saying.

**Clean** - Keep your body and mind fit. Help keep your home and community clean.

**Reverent** - Be reverent toward God. Be faithful in your religious duties. Respect the beliefs of others.

## Beauty in Unexpected Blessings Betty Long

Snow fell on Halloween 2019. It was certainly inconvenient for Trick or Treaters! Since leaf-fall was late, it was certainly inconvenient timing for the many trees with autumn leaves still attached. The snow weighed heavily on the branches and many broke as a result. On the other side of this inconvenience was great beauty observed in many landscapes, such as these branches of colorful leaves photographed at the Morton Arboretum the next morning.

Nature is a great metaphor for God.

In our lives, God may call upon us to step up when we don't find it convenient. We may make all sorts of excuses to ourselves or to others for ignoring the call, but our conscience niggles us. If instead we answer the call, we may discover unexpected blessings in doing God's work. Our lives will be enriched by giving of ourselves to others. Heed the call! Find beauty!

