

Origen of Alexandria, *On Prayer* (185-254)

The fact is, I believe it to be itself one of those things which, judged by our weakness, are impossible, clearly to set forth with accuracy and reverence a complete account of prayer, and in particular of how prayer ought to be offered, what ought to be said to God in prayer, which seasons are more, which less, suitable for prayer.

It is necessary not merely to pray but also to pray as we ought and to pray what we ought. For even though we are enabled to understand what we ought to pray, that is not adequate if we do not add to it the right manner also. Of these two things the one, I mean the ‘what we ought’ of prayer, is the language of the prayer, while the ‘as we ought’ is the disposition of him who prays.

Paul knows how much is lacking to knowledge of the right way to pray what he ought, he says “but what we ought to pray we know not how to as we ought,” and adds thereto the source from which a man’s deficiency is made up if though ignorant he has rendered himself worthy to have the deficiency made up within him: “The Spirit himself more than intercedes with God in sighs unspeakable and He that searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because His intercession on behalf of saints is according to God.” Thus the Spirit “more than intercedes with God in sighs unspeakable,” for the great love and sympathy He feels for men taking our sighs upon himself.

For the Son of God is high priest of our offerings and our pleader with the Father. He prays for those who pray, and pleads along with those who plead. But these pray along with those who genuinely pray—not only the high priest but also the angels who “rejoice in heaven over one repenting sinner more than over ninety-nine righteous that need not repentance,” and also the souls of the saints already at rest. Nay more, beholding ever the face of the Father in heaven and looking on the Godhead of our Creator, the angel of each man, even of “little ones” within the church, both prays with us, and acts with us where possible, for the objects of our prayer.

But if we accept prayer in its full meaning, we may not ever pray to any begotten being, not even to Christ himself, but only to the God and Father of All to whom our Savior both prayed himself, and teaches us to pray. It remains, accordingly, to pray to God alone, the Father of All, not however apart from the High Priest who has been appointed by the Father with swearing of an oath, according to the words He hath sworn and shall not repent, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” In thanksgiving to God, therefore, during their prayers, saints acknowledge His favors through Christ Jesus. So then hearing Jesus speak to such effect, let us pray to God through Him, all with one accord and without division concerning the manner of prayer.

That benefit accrues to him who prays rightly or according to his ability strives to do so, follows, I consider, in many ways: It is, first of all, surely in every sense a spiritual advantage to him who is intent upon prayer, in the very composure of prayer to present himself to God and in His presence to speak to Him with a vivid sense that he looks on and is present.

For when the eyes of thought are lifted up from dwelling on earthly things and being filled with the imagination of material objects, and are elevated to such a height as to look beyond begotten things and to be engaged solely in contemplation of God and in solemn converse with Him becoming to the Hearer, surely those eyes themselves have already got the highest advantage in

reflecting the glory of the Lord with face unveiled and being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, for they then partake of a certain divine perception shown by the words: “the light of your face, O Lord, hath been signalized upon us.” (Ps.4:6).

We should therefore pray for the principal and truly great and heavenly things, and as for those concerned with the shadows accompanying the principal, commit them to the God who knows before we ask Him what things, by reason of our perishable body, we have need.

Never turning his glance outwards or doting on things outside, having shut up every door of the senses that he may not be drawn away by sensations or have their sensible presentation stealing into his mind, one prays to the Father who does not shun or desert a place so secret but dwells in it, the Only Begotten also being present with Him.

He ought thus to enter upon prayer with his soul, as it were, extended before his hands, and his mind intent on God before his eyes, and his intellect raised from earth and set toward the Lord of All before his body stands. Let him put away all resentment against any real or imagined injurer in proportion to his desire for God not to bear resentment against himself in turn for his injuries and sins against many of his neighbors or any wrong deeds whatsoever upon his conscience.

Of all the innumerable dispositions of the body that, accompanied by outstretching of the hands and upraising of the eyes, standing is preferred—inasmuch as one thereby wears in the body also the image of the devotional characteristics that become the soul. Moreover, one must know that kneeling is necessary when he is about to arraign his personal sins against God with supplication for their healing and forgiveness, because it is a symbol of submission and subjection.

In regard to place, it should be known that every place is rendered fit for prayer by one who prays rightly, for in every place sacrifice is offered to me . . . says the Lord, and I desire therefore that men pray in every place. But to secure the performance of one’s prayers in peace without distraction, the rule is for every man to make choice, if possible, of what I may term the most solemn spot in his house before he prays. Yet there is a certain helpful charm in a place of prayer being the spot in which believers meet together. Also it may well be that the assemblies of believers also are attended by angelic powers, by the powers of our Lord and Savior himself, and indeed by the spirits of saints, including those already fallen asleep, certainly of those still in life, though just how is not easy to say.

I have still to treat the topics of prayer. The topics are as follows: [1] In the beginning and opening of prayer, glory is to be ascribed according to one’s ability to God, through Christ who is to be glorified with Him, and in the Holy Spirit who is to be proclaimed with Him. [2] Thereafter, one should put thanksgivings: common thanksgivings—into which he introduces benefits conferred upon men in general—and thanksgivings for things which he has personally received from God. [3] After thanksgiving it appears to me that one ought to become a powerful accuser of one’s own sins before God and ask first for healing with a view to being released from the habit which brings on sin, and secondly for forgiveness for past actions. [4] After confession it appears to me that one ought to append as a fourth element the asking for the great and heavenly things, both personal and general, on behalf of one’s nearest and dearest. [5] And last of all, one should bring prayer to an end ascribing glory to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.