

Daniel L. Migliore

## **Arguing with God**

Resistance and Relinquishment  
in the Life of Faith

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## Resistance and Relinquishment in the Life of Faith

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## Arguing with God

### Resistance and Relinquishment in the Life of Faith

*Daniel L. Migliore*

Arguing with God would seem an unpromising topic. Not that we underestimate the value of a good argument. When people disagree on important matters, we expect the disputants to present their case and to give an account of the reasons for their position. We argue in the university and in the public domain generally because our life together requires some measure of agreement about common values and virtues. Without some agreement on what we hold to be true, good, and just, clarified and confirmed in part by persuasive arguments, a society can be held together only by coercion.

While we are familiar with the practice of argument in the courtroom and the classroom, we are far less familiar with its practice in the life of faith. Could an omnipotent and omniscient deity be swayed by the arguments of a finite creature? More to the point, would not believers consider arguing with God an act of infidelity? How dare we argue with God? Theologians, of course, argue continuously *about* God and what God has revealed to humankind, as the very structure of theological classics like Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica reminds us. But arguing *about* God and arguing *with* God seem to most believers to be utterly different practices. For many people of faith there is something strange, sinister, and even blasphemous about the thought, let alone the practice, of arguing with God.

Nevertheless, I want to contend that the vitality of our spiritual life and the authenticity of our practice of prayer are diminished if we ignore or proscribe prayers of protest, and argument with God.<sup>1</sup> The biblical form of prayer that includes uncomfortable prayers of protest and argument with God is often described as the prayer of lament. This form of prayer has deep roots in the biblical tradition. Even if it has always evoked considerable suspicion and uneasiness, it is part of our common Jewish and Christian heritage of faith. It has proved valuable, even life-preserving, to many believers in every age, not least our own, who experience a world rife with the aching absence, the awful silence, and the terrible hiddenness of God.

In the following remarks I will first describe in greater detail what I mean by the biblical tradition of arguing with God; second, I will identify the particular context of such prayer; third, I will reflect on the highly paradoxical nature of arguing with God; and finally, I will consider some of the spiritual and pastoral benefits of prayer that is bold enough to include arguing with God.

### **A Spiritual Tradition of Arguing with God**

As Jewish philosopher Anson Laytner has shown, arguing with God forms a remarkable minority voice within the Jewish tradition of piety and prayer.<sup>2</sup> One thinks of Abraham's

prayer in defense of the righteous inhabitants of the wicked city of Sodom that God had determined to obliterate, or of Moses' arguments to God on behalf of the wayward people of Israel, or of the memorable quarrels of some of the prophets of Israel with God.

But of course the most notable biblical exemplars of arguing with God are found in the lament psalms and in the book of Job. In the psalms of lament, which comprise a significant proportion of the Psalter, we find not only expressions of anger, despair, and protest, but also arguments why God should intervene on behalf of the sufferer. The one who prays gives reasons why a given situation is intolerable and why God should act to rectify it. Typically, the plaintiff argues that God's justice and glory are in jeopardy, that remedial action is in accordance with God's compassionate nature and revealed will, and that without help God's loyal servant will be undone. As Patrick Miller observes, such argumentative prayers form a striking counterpoint to the arguments that God gives in support of Israel's keeping the covenant with God and obeying God's law. The one who prays "can urge reasons upon God for acting in behalf of the one in need, just as God, in giving the law, urges reasons on the people for responding and obeying."<sup>iii</sup>

The freedom to argue with God comes to full flower in the book of Job. This book is among the most remarkable expressions of faith in all religious literature. Unlike the pious and patient Job of the opening chapters who famously bears his suffering with the words, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord," the Job of the poetic sections of the book enters into fierce argumentation with God. Not only does Job lament his terrible personal, familial, and material losses; not only does he curse the day on which he was born; not only does he complain of God's distance and apparent indifference; Job also dares to argue with God — dares, we might say, even to put God on trial.

Laytner demonstrates that the Jewish heritage of remonstrance with God, while always somewhat suspect and marginal, has not only been preserved in the rabbinic tradition but has also found haunting expression in Jewish literature, perhaps especially in Jewish poetry, in the post-Holocaust period. Another Jewish rabbi-scholar, David Blumenthal, in his highly controversial book, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, continues in this tradition and carries it to what is perhaps its extreme limit. Charging that God is at least occasionally abusive, Blumenthal contends it is essential that the believing community acknowledge this fact and be willing to forgive God.<sup>iv</sup>

The most widely read representative of the tradition of arguing with God in our time is surely Elie Wiesel, survivor of Auschwitz. Beginning with his shattering book *Night*, which narrates the author's profound crisis of faith in the death camps, Wiesel's writings trace his long journey of struggle and argument with God. His book *The Trial of God* is a devastating retelling of the story of Job in the context of a seventeenth-century pogrom. Throughout the story, Berish the innkeeper protests the injustice that Yahweh has chosen to ignore. As the story moves to its murderous conclusion, Berish cries out: "I lived as a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I die — and it is as a Jew that, with my last breath, I shall shout my protest to God!"<sup>v</sup>

While never swerving from his protest against the unimaginable devastation of the

Holocaust, Wiesel's pilgrimage of faith has continued to this very day. Several years ago, Wiesel wrote a deeply moving prayer entitled, "Prayer for the Days of Awe." In it he rehearses his life-long argument with God in the wake of the holocaust. "Master of the Universe, what hurt me more: your absence or your silence?... In my childhood I did not expect much from human beings. But I expected everything from you. Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? What was going on in heaven, at the celestial tribunal, while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death only because they were Jewish? These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades..."

After interrogating God, Wiesel's prayer, like so many of the lament prayers of the psalmist, unexpectedly shifts in tone and direction. "At one point." Wiesel's prayer continues, "I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came down ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men, implemented by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but you as well. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?... Let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long."<sup>VI</sup>

It is important to understand Wiesel's prayer not as an isolated moment in an otherwise serene life of faith but as the condensation of a long and intense spiritual struggle. The feelings and thoughts that the prayer expresses record a history of wrestling with God that even after five decades is marked by the extraordinary tension of questioning God and trusting God. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has shown, this same tension is characteristic of the canon of scripture as a whole in so far as it contains not only the dominant doxological voice of the faith tradition but also preserves the questioning voice of the countertradition of faith. Without the countertradition, mere repetition of the dominant tradition in the face of terrible suffering risks being perceived as fraudulent and incredible.<sup>VII</sup>

If the prayer of lament, protest, and argument with God has been a minority but persistent and disturbing voice of Jewish piety, it has largely disappeared in the Christian tradition of prayer and spirituality. This has happened in spite of the fact that the Psalter is the revered prayer book of Christians as well as Jews. It has happened in spite of the fact that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and his cry of abandonment from the cross strongly suggest dominical authorization of the practice of relating to God not only in prayers of praise and thanksgiving but also in questioning and lamentful forms of prayer. Rejected or marginalized in the Christian theological and liturgical tradition, prayers of lament, protest, and argument with God have nevertheless provided many people of faith with a necessary medium of communication with God in times of terrible loss, anger, and despair. Indeed, without this medium of communication these believers may have found themselves entirely cut off from God.

## The Context of Arguing with God

How are we to understand this strange act of arguing with God? What kind of argument is this? In response to this question, it is helpful to note that all argument is shaped by its context. As philosopher Stephen Toulmin explains, the form which arguments take and the standards by which we judge their soundness will vary somewhat from field to field.<sup>viii</sup> We need to know the context in which an argument is being presented, the tradition of discourse in which it is employed, and the rules of argumentation that are considered relevant if we are to grasp the force of the argument and assess its soundness. You have to know physics in order to understand an argument in physics. Similarly, you have to know something about the religious tradition and the faith practices of Jewish or Christian prayer if you are to grasp what is going on when people of faith argue with God in prayer.

The place to begin in clarifying the context of arguing with God is to differentiate this practice from the philosophical and theological enterprise called theodicy. Theodicy and arguing with God in prayer are two different undertakings. The theodicy question – how can we defend God in the face of outrageous evil? – can be pursued apart from actual experience of terrible suffering and apart from the struggle of faith and the crisis of prayer arising from this suffering. By contrast, arguing with God is a questioning of God’s justice rather than a defense of it. Moreover, far from an abstract inquiry, arguing with God is a passionate act in which everything is at stake. Arguing with God is the prayer of a believer or of an entire community of faith experiencing inexplicable suffering and the silence of God. It is not evidence of a loss of faith but the expression of faith in a wounded form.

The context of arguing with God is life within the covenant community. According to scripture, God’s relationship with the world takes the form of a covenant with a people called to declare the glory, justice, and mercy of God. This covenant relationship is not a contract between two equal parties, but is based strictly on God’s grace and promise: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” God is the initiator of the covenant, and God is the partner whose unbroken faithfulness maintains the covenant. The covenant relationship with God is lived out in the practices of the community of faith. Among these practices is prayer in its many different forms. The dominant form of prayer in the covenant community is praise, thanksgiving, and exaltation in response to God’s many blessings and mighty deeds of salvation. Other forms of prayer within the covenant relationship are petition and intercession-prayers that ask for blessings of the holy and gracious God not only on oneself and on one’s community but also on all who are in need.

Lament, protest, and argument with God are certainly less familiar forms of prayer. Still, this prayer too has its setting in the history of the living God with his people, a history in which God promises his steadfast love and summons his people to faith and obedience. When events seem to challenge the validity of the covenant promises, when sufferings that are endured seem far to exceed what could be construed as discipline or training or chastisement, when the God of the covenant is experienced as painfully silent or deeply hidden in the midst of outra-

geous evil, the people of God cry out in their loneliness and sense of abandonment. Some may dare to argue with God. However difficult it may be for us to grasp, in the biblical understanding of the covenant relationship between God and God's people, arguing with God in times of distress to demonstrate anew God's justice and mercy has its rightful place. The prayer of lament and protest, like other forms of prayer, is a sign both of the extraordinary freedom of God and of the different but nonetheless genuine freedom given to God's covenant partners.

It is this theme of the twofold freedom of God and of God's covenant partners that Karl Barth underscores in his remarkable interpretation of the Book of Job in his Church Dogmatics IV/3. The God of the covenant is the God of free grace. God is free in the act of creation, free in the act of forgiveness and reconciliation, free in the act of renewal and transformation of life. From the perspective of the biblical tradition, there is no abstract necessity that drives God into this relationship with creatures. It flows solely from the divine goodness and the divine freedom in which God chooses to create the world and enter into costly relationship to it.

But if the God of the covenant is astonishingly free in grace, no less astonishing is the freedom given to the covenant partner of God. The God who is freely gracious and who yearns for covenant communion with humanity wills his covenant partners to respond freely and gladly to God. Not of course in the supposed absolute freedom of the solitary, completely autonomous self of the Enlightenment whose definition of freedom and self-determination teeters on the abyss of boundlessness, but in a responsible freedom that corresponds to God's own freedom for loving and faithful relationship with others.

Job, Barth rightly says, speaks with God freely. His speaking with God is not like the defenders of God whose speeches are like "cut flowers." Job is free to argue with God. Arguing with God takes place when the God who is known as just, merciful, and faithful becomes deeply hidden in the experience of injustice and abandonment. The deepest agony of Job is that he can no longer discern God's presence and activity in the world.

Not that the covenant love of God guarantees the absence of failure, suffering, and loss. Suffering can be the occasion of spiritual growth and discovery. As the servant songs of Second Isaiah and the passion narratives of the Gospels attest, suffering can even be a vehicle of God's redemptive work. Nevertheless, the God of the covenant wills the triumph of life over death. Hence in the biblical understanding of God's purposes for human life there is no glorifying of suffering or any suggestion that it is inherently ennobling.

Arguing with God arises when God's grace is deeply hidden and God's justice completely veiled, when God's promises are contradicted by catastrophic experiences, and evil appears victorious. In the prayer of lament, protest, and argument with God, the freedom of God's covenant partner is stretched to the breaking point. The God who seeks relationship with us makes room for this stretching of human freedom within the covenant. For God wants honesty rather than pretense in our prayer. God invites us as covenant partners to stand before God with all that we are, experience, and hope for, so that it is truly we ourselves who are there, in all of our distress and hope, and not a camouflaged or make-believe self.



From this perspective, it is both legitimate and even necessary for the covenant community to make room for lament and argument with God in prayer. Were God the indifferent God of deism or the tyrannical God of human imagination about whom all we could say is that God is omnipotent and we humans are absolutely dependent, argument with God would appear meaningless or blasphemous. But the God of the covenant is neither indifferent nor tyrannical. The God of the covenant who relates to human beings in gracious freedom and calls them to community and partnership, wills that they relate to God in responsible freedom. The primary expression of this freedom in response to God's gift of life will ordinarily be joy, thanksgiving, intercession for the lost and the needy, and wholehearted love of God and others. But the responsible freedom of the covenant partner also finds expression in lament of loss, protest of injustice, and argument with God for the manifestation of God's justice and peace in a world that continues to be marked by injustice, violence, and death.

### **The Paradoxes of Arguing with God**

Arguing with God is a highly paradoxical form of prayer. Indeed, there are at least three paradoxes involved. The first paradox of arguing with God is that such prayer aims to persuade the just God to do justice. In other words, it appeals to God to be God. On the one hand, God is acknowledged by the wounded believer as the ultimate source and criterion of justice; on the other hand, God is called upon to act justly. Using the language of Paul Tillich, we could state this paradox even more provocatively: In arguing with God one appeals to "God beyond God." But I prefer to put it another way: In the struggle with seemingly indomitable forces of evil and destruction, God is called upon not only to save the human partner of the covenant but also to save God's own justice and glory. Arguing with God is, paradoxically, for God's sake as well as for the covenant partner's sake.

Injustice, violence, and death contradict the character and purposes of God. When evil, injustice, and death prevail in the world created and ruled by God, it is not only humanity that suffers but also the glory of God that suffers. Irenaeus said that the "glory of God is humanity fully alive." If that is true, the argument on behalf of humanity fully alive is at the same time an argument in defense of the glory of God. This paradox of persuading God to be God, or even appealing to God beyond God, marks the prayer of lament, protest, and argument with God.

According to the Gospel story, Jesus experienced this paradox of the prayer of lament. The meaning of our Lord's cry of abandonment from the cross cannot be fully comprehended if we see it only as the cry of a lonely prophet grieving his own unjust end. In the context of Jesus' total devotion to God and his inauguration of God's coming reign, the question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" seems inseparable from the question: Why has God abandoned the cause of God's reign that was begun with power in Jesus' ministry of justice, mercy, and reconciliation?<sup>21X</sup>

A second paradox of arguing with God is the inseparability of the spirit of revolt and the

openness to repentance. There is clearly an element of revolt in Job's practice of lament, protest, and argument with God. We could go so far as to call the tradition of arguing with God a veritable seedbed of revolution. It represents a refusal in the supreme court of the universe to accept the forces of violence, injustice, disease, and death as the final word and will of God. The person of faith rises up and rebels against these supposedly inevitable and ultimate powers. If God wills that there be life and not death, the believer must rebel in the name of life even if this rebellion takes the scandalous form of arguing with God. If God wills a culture of life and justice as opposed to a culture of injustice and death, even God is accountable to God's own revealed will. Arguing with God expresses this radical spirit of revolt in the name of God.

It must be immediately added, however, that the spirit of revolt of the person of faith and prayer is different from the spirit of humanistic revolt, as impressive as this sometimes may be. Albert Camus is one of the most influential representatives of the humanistic spirit of revolt in a world ruled by the forces of injustice and the law of death. Indeed, Camus might be considered a kind of saint of the postmodern world. Like Camus, postmodern thinkers want us to give up all illusions, all grand narratives, all big hopes for universal justice and world transformation, in favor of the moral integrity of the unconquered rebel. According to Camus, the true rebel is like the mythical figure of Sisyphus who repeatedly rolls a great stone to the top of a hill only to have it roll down again to the bottom. In other words, the rebel knows that the power that rules this world will simply not support the highest ideals and aspirations of humanity. Nevertheless, in his hopeless struggle for justice and love the rebel chooses to live against the grain of the universe and thereby thinks at least to retain his integrity.

While a spirit of rebellion is present in the Psalmist who asks, "How long, O Lord?" and in the arguments of Job who demands justice from the Almighty, the Jewish and Christian traditions of prayer never absolutize rebellion. They acknowledge that God is God, that our struggles and protests on behalf of justice and peace are not free of the acids of self-deception and self-justification, and that answering hatred with hatred and violence with counter-violence are ultimately self-defeating. So the person or community of faith who argues with God and calls God to account nevertheless clings to God as the ultimate source of justice and as the one who calls us to account. This tension is acute and remains unresolved in the life of faith in distress.

A third paradox of arguing with God is the inseparability of resistance and relinquishment. Resistance to evil and the forces of destruction as they are encountered in one's own life and in the larger social world is part of what it means to be a believer in God who wills life and life abundant. The prophetic heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a heritage of resistance to injustice. Contrary to some popular misunderstandings of the practice of prayer, this spirit of resistance finds expression and empowerment in prayer. Prayer in the prophetic tradition includes the bold reminder to God that things should not be this way, that it is time and past time for God to act.

And yet there is a kind of surrender, a kind of relinquishment that cannot be separated from prayer if it is to remain prayer within the context of the covenant relationship with God. This is the deep significance of the speeches of Yahweh that seem in many respect to be an evasion

of Job's impassioned charges. As Carol Newsom argues, "What God offers Job are images that can serve as radical metaphor, formal patterns, and structures of thought different from his accustomed ones, disciplines of attention, modes of imagination."<sup>x</sup> Yahweh's speeches seek to expand the horizon of Job and to prevent him from focusing entirely on himself. Job is summoned to remain open to a fulfillment of God's purposes greater than Job has yet imagined. This fact is recognized by Job in the final stage of his struggle as it is also recognized by Wiesel in the closing lines of his prayer.

This surrender or relinquishment in the midst of the struggle for justice and peace is very different from a spirit of servility or resignation. It is more like what Paul Ricoeur calls "consent," an openness to deeper understanding, a willingness to endure and persist for the time being in the trust that God who remains ever a mystery to us is nevertheless revealed as good and will rescue the distressed. Theologian Karl Rahner seems to me to capture the essence of this paradox as it is found in the Gospel narratives by repeatedly juxtaposing two words of Jesus from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and "Father, into your hands I offer my spirit."<sup>xii</sup> Not one of these words without the other, but both held together in utmost tension until the drama of redemption is complete.

The paradox of arguing with God is thus a relentless resistance to the present state of affairs on the one hand, and on the other hand, a relinquishment to God of the timing and the means by which God's gracious and just purposes will be achieved. Walter Brueggemann seems to have this paradox in mind when he identifies some possible dangers of the prayer of lament and argument with God. One danger is that in the name of justice the perpetrators of injustice will be hated and cursed with religiously grounded finality and their destruction plotted with the assistance of God. Brueggemann rightly contends that our fierce anger and protest should not be repressed but brought to God and given over to God. Our rage and desire for vengeance must be offered up, must be relinquished to God.<sup>xiii</sup>

In the lament prayers of scripture and in the arguments with God of so many wounded believers of the modern period like Wiesel, the paradoxical combination of prophetic resistance and faithful consent is discernible. Their unity is never guaranteed, never predictable, never something that occurs with certainty in a moment, a day, or even years. If and when faith gains new perspective on experienced suffering, it is emphatically not a movement away from resistance. It does not signal that the spirit of resistance to evil has been weakened or even obliterated. On the contrary, that spirit of resistance will find reinforcement in prayer and will seek to be appropriately embodied in action. But accompanying the resistance we can sometimes discern what can only be called a miraculous act of relinquishment. It is a surrender of the spirit of bitterness and vengeance that resistance to evil is capable of extorting from believers and that relentlessly tempts them in their life-long struggle against the forces of destruction and death in the world.

## Spiritual and Pastoral Benefits of Arguing with God

In this final section, I want to consider briefly some benefits for the life of faith of the bold practice of arguing with God in the face of injustice, loss, suffering, and death.

The gift of a language of pain. I mention this gift first because one of the cruelties of the experience of radical evil is that it is “language shattering.” The capacity to speak and to name is a distinctive mark of human life. Virtually every sphere of human experience and cultural activity—whether politics, economics, law, sports, the arts—has a particular language, a mode of discourse that articulates or thematizes these experiences. Intense pain, however, borders on the inexpressible, and our resources to speak of it are few. Acute suffering creates an abyss of speechlessness for the person in pain. The sufferer literally does not know how to express what is happening except to groan or cry or scream. In her study of the experience of pain, Elaine Scarry writes that “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Survivors of abuse, torture, and the terrors of death camps testify to the veil of silence that falls over the eruption of massive evil and suffering. The flames of Auschwitz, writes Elie Wiesel, drive speech to silence. The same could be said of the histories of the experience of brutality by other peoples such as Native Americans and African slaves in America. It is far easier to suppress the memory of such events or to entomb them in silence than to bring them to memory and speech with all the pain this entails.

The frustration of lacking the power of speech in the face of profound suffering is also well known to pastors and other caregivers. We often do not know what to say or how to pray appropriately with victims of terrible loss, injustice, abuse, and disease. In the presence of a mother whose baby has died of leukemia, of a family whose gay son has been brutalized in a hate-crime, of people who have lost everything in a natural disaster or in warfare, all who seek to help – pastors, doctors, nurses, friends – often experience a loss of words, an incapacity to speak.

The language of prayer, writes J.B. Metz, is “the only language capable of expressing many situations and experiences in our lives.”<sup>xiv</sup> The prayer of lament and protest provides a language of suffering missing in everyday language or in our many technical languages. Lamenting to God and arguing with God are indispensable ways of giving speech to language-shattering experiences of suffering. Pastoral care, worship, and all other aspects of Christian ministry must be informed not only by the need of the human spirit for a language fit to celebrate moments of grace and joy; they must also be sensitive to the need that suffering people have for a language of pain and grief.

The gift of honoring embodied life. Lament and argumentation that arise from the experience of suffering honor the reality and value of our embodied existence. Lamenting to God and arguing with God are forms of prayer that remind us we are embodied creatures, that our bodies and the bodies of others need attention and care. Biblical prayers do not confine the cry for

help to the rescue of the soul. We find argument with God in the biblical tradition in part because of its strong conviction that this embodied life, this life in time and space, this flesh, is valuable. Dualisms that tear soul from body and humanity from nature are alien to the biblical tradition. A faith that confesses that God has created this material world and called it good, that honors and blesses the deep bonds and relationships that embodied existence supports, and that dares to speak of God's own embodiment in Jesus Christ places enormous value on life in the body. The value of embodied life, I submit, is affirmed and honored by the prayer of lament and argument with God.

The gift of permission to lament, protest, and argue. As noted earlier, there is a long tradition of suspicion in Christian theology of deep or public expressions of grief. The idea that it is somehow a failure or a weakness of Christian faith to grieve and lament in response to profound loss still influences many Christians and poses a challenge to pastoral care.

Who gives permission in the Christian community to lament loss, protest injustice, and take one's case to God in prayer? I think the clear answer to this question is that permission is granted or withheld by the church leadership, by the ethos of a particular community of faith, by their liturgy, by the way they use or fail to use the Bible, and by the doctrines that regulate their faith and life.

Whether the experience be that of abandonment by friends or apparently even by God (Ps.22), the ravages of illness and old age (Ps.38), the sense of defeat and discouragement (Ps.69), the suffering of abuse and other injustices (Ps.55), the biblical witnesses are far freer and far more daring in their address to God in difficult circumstances than are many Christian congregations today.

The gift of new understandings of God and of ourselves. Perhaps the most important gift of the prayer of lament and protest is the opportunity it provides for challenge and transformation of inherited understandings of God and of ourselves that run counter to the biblical witness and to central Christian doctrines as well as to the hard realities of human experience.

The doctrine of the omnipotence of God is a case in point. This doctrine has often been understood to teach that God exercises power by sheer domination and control of all events. When God's power is so understood, the task of the believer is basically the unquestioning submission of the self to the will of God as this is expressed in whatever happens in one's own life or in the lives of others.

But this understanding of the power of God and the unquestioning submission to events that it is thought to require is shattered by the message of Christ crucified. In Christ God graciously enters human life to its depths and experiences the violence, injustice, suffering, and death that afflict us and our world. God suffers with and for us. In the ministry and death of Jesus, viewed in Easter light, God triumphs over sin and death not by the exercise of raw power but by the omnipotence of vulnerable, self-giving love. That Jesus Christ, God become human for us, experiences the injustice and suffering that ravage an unredeemed world is the truth at the heart of the Christian gospel.

This gospel that God has taken our human condition to God's self in Jesus Christ to restore

us to communion with God and with each other illumines all of Christian life and practice, including the practice of prayer. Just as by faith we take part in the mystery of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, just as by faith we are baptized in Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, are crucified with him on Golgotha, and participate in the new life of his resurrection, so too our praying is encompassed in the praying of Jesus. Our prayer of thanksgiving to the Father is a participation in Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving; our prayer for the unity of the church is a participation in Jesus' prayer that we all may be one even as the Father and the Son are one; our prayer of surrender to the gracious hands of God, both in our living and in our dying, is a participation in Jesus' prayer of surrender. But so too must we understand our anguished and questioning prayers as a participation in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane and in his cry of loneliness and his experience of the absence of God on the cross.

Understanding our prayer to God in this way profoundly affects our understanding of ourselves and what is considered appropriate in prayer. In prayer we are not only servants and children of God; we are also partners and co-workers with God. This is daring language, but it cannot be avoided if the fully personal relationship that God intends to have with us is to be honored. We do not need to hide any dimension of our life, however messy and terrifying, from God. We do not have to suppress our doubts, anger, outrage, or experience of disappointment. We do not have to withhold our protest that things are not right or our arguments that things should be different, that justice should flow like a mighty stream, that the innocent should not be violated nor peacemakers murdered. The freedom to pray in this way is, I contend, a bedrock of human dignity and responsibility before God and others.

Prayer helps to form us as responsible persons. We become persons and discover our identity and responsibility only in relationship with others and above all in relationship with the transcendent Other we call God. Only relationships that permit us to be ourselves and to express ourselves without fear of penalty, that encourage us to take initiative as well as being recipients of the initiative of others, provide the context for moral and spiritual growth. The God who hears prayer – including questioning and contentious prayer – is the God who empowers human freedom and responsibility. In sum, prayer that is bold enough to question and to argue is person-forming and person-empowering. The God who honors the complaint of those unjustly treated and values argumentation over unquestioning submission is the God who has created and redeemed us to be free and responsible subjects.

The gift of solidarity with all who suffer. Does attention to our suffering make us self-preoccupied and self-pitying? It certainly can have that effect, but not necessarily. Indeed, it can have the very opposite effect. It can make us more sensitive and sympathetic to the suffering of others.

Suffering both bonds and separates us. It is never helpful to say to someone who is experiencing terrible loss, "I know exactly how you feel." Even when people experience a common tragedy (war, exile, plane crash, fire, flood), each person's, each family's suffering has its own distinctive history and character. At the same time, our own suffering may help us become more fully aware of our solidarity with all who suffer.

The experience of suffering and of resistance to suffering may awaken in us a new sense of connection with other suffering human beings. It may even, as in the case of the Apostle Paul, make us more sensitive to the suffering of the whole creation.

Reflecting on the loss of his son in a mountain-climbing accident, Yale Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff writes: "More of suffering is now accessible to me. I still don't fully know what it's like to be one of those mothers one sees in poverty posters, soup tin in hand, bloated child alongside, utterly dependent for her very existence on the largesse of others. I still don't fully know what it's like to be a member of a people whose whole national existence is under attack, Armenian or Jew or Palestinian. Yet I now know more of it."<sup>xv</sup>

If we stand in the tradition of the psalmists, Jeremiah, Jesus, and the Apostles, our prayers of lament and our arguments with God will not end in self-absorption, but in a journey to the depths of solidarity with the whole groaning creation, yearning for the coming of God's justice, peace, and renewal of life.

The gift of release from desire for revenge. Although I have already emphasized that a Christian understanding of the prayer of lament as a participation in the lament of Jesus directs us toward a relinquishment rather than a strengthening of the spirit of vengeance, this point warrants brief reiteration. Protest completely detached from prayer and the community of faith can become spiritually destructive. Arguing with God can lose itself in a cauldron of hate and self-justification. It is, therefore, essential to bring one's rage and one's arguments to God so that they may be purified and transformed. As Miroslav Volf writes, "By placing unattended rage before God we place both our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self face to face with a God who loves and does justice."<sup>xvi</sup> When we pray to God who is present in the crucified One, we are constrained to recognize that our enemy is also one for whom Christ died even as we are also sinners who have not always acted justly toward others. Bringing our rage to God and relinquishing it to God differs radically both from the way of repression and from the way of exacerbating the thirst for vengeance.

It is this giving of our rage and bitterness to God that frees us from the burden and bondage of hatred and desire for revenge. That is a basis of real hope. Brueggemann rightly says that "only grief permits newness." He means that if our grief and anger remain unexpressed, the mourner may remain forever trapped in the darkness of the experience of terrible loss. It is the same with our hatred and desire for vengeance. These must be given to God, not in order that our passion for justice may thereby be diminished, but in order that God may purify our passion of those impulses and responses that if unchecked are destructive not only of others but of ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

My basic concern in this lecture is for the freedom and honesty of prayer and all that this freedom implies for our understandings of God and of ourselves. If in Christian life, we cannot express our doubts, our faith will be half-hearted; if we cannot shed tears over loss and

waste, our laughter will be hollow; if we cannot express our outrage against injustice, our commitment to God's reign will be lukewarm; if we cannot argue with God, we cannot be brought to deeper understanding.

I like to think of the tensions of Christian prayer as embodied in the figures of Rachel and Mary. Rachel bitterly laments the loss of her children. "A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be consoled because they are no more" (Jer. 31:15). Rachel refuses consolation; she resists all comfort extended to her because she refuses to get used to, to be reconciled with, the injustice and violence of her world. Rachel's piety is a deeply Jewish piety; but it also gives powerful voice to the mothers of every nation and age whose children have been taken into exile, enslaved, made to disappear, or murdered.

Mary is the Christian exemplar of prayer. She is startled by the message of the angel Gabriel. Her astonishing word of acceptance, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38), has echoed through the centuries as the highest expression of Christian surrender and willingness to do the will of God.

The contrast seems so stark. Rachel refuses; Mary accepts. Rachel weeps; Mary rejoices. Rachel loses her children; Mary is given a child. Rachel expresses rage; Mary is serene. If this stark contrast is accepted as accurate, it is hardly surprising that the prayer and spirituality of the church have privileged the prayer of Mary and neglected the prayer of Rachel.

But the truth is not as simple as this neat contrast suggests. Rachel's cry and protest makes room for the new. It keeps open the possibility of once again praising God, not falsely or mechanically, but from the heart. Rachel's disturbing lament and her courageous if unarticulated argument with God are not contrary to praise but the precondition of authentic, honest praise.

Also contrary to conventional portrayals, Mary's prayer is far from a naïve acceptance of things as they are. In her great prayer of praise, Mary rejoices that God has overturned the injustice of this world and has lifted up the poor and satisfied the hungry. Mary, like Rachel, will lose her child, and the sword of grief will piece her heart too. The story of the flight of the holy family to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents is told in the Gospel of Matthew with the poignant reminder that once again Rachel's cry is heard, weeping bitterly and refusing all consolation.

Rachel and Mary are bound together as sisters of faith in the biblical tradition. Though the church has often forgotten Rachel and to this extent distorted her own memory of Mary, the two belong together in our prayer and spiritual formation. In our prayer and practice, resistance to injustice *and* relinquishment to God of our desires for vengeance and of our zeal to fight violence with violence, must not be separated. As those summoned always to call upon God, we are given the freedom to pray. That precious gift includes the freedom to praise the goodness of God but also to argue with God when evil and injustice seem triumphant. We pray with Mary and with Rachel, but ultimately our prayer must be taken up into the prayer of Jesus who alone can teach us to pray and whose grace alone enables us to struggle for justice and peace in a spirit of mercy and humility.



## Notes

- I See Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999).
- II Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1990).
- III Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 126.
- IV David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Philadelphia: W/JNP, 1993).
- V Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979).
- VI Elie Wiesel, "Prayer for the Days of Awe," *New York Times*, October 2, 1997.
- VII Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).
- VIII See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 1958).
- IX See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 151.
- X Carol Newsom, "The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in the Light of God's Speech in Job," in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 15 (1994), 16.
- XI See, for example, Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 79.
- XII Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House 1981), 85.
- XIII Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- XIV Karl Rahner and Johann Baptist Metz, *The Courage to Pray* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 18.
- XV Nicholas Wolstorstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 72.
- XVI Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 124.

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