

*Prayers for*  
PEOPLE UNDER  
PRESSURE



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*Prayers for People under Pressure*

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## *Journey into Prayer*

I know you're having a terrible time. Can I come in and pray with you?" said the man standing on my doorstep. It was the summer of 1997, and I was under tremendous pressure from media stakeouts and scrutiny. So I hesitated, fearing that this might be yet another ingenious ploy by a reporter to get inside the house. After some suspicious peering at the entry-phone screen I recognized the man on the doorstep. He was a distant acquaintance, Mervyn Thomas. I remembered that he had recently written me a sympathetic letter about the disastrous collapse of my libel action against *The Guardian*. I did not have many sympathizers in those dark days. So on impulse I let him in.

In the conversation that followed Mervyn Thomas made it clear that what he had really meant on the doorstep was that he wanted to pray *out loud* with me. Belonging as I then did to the reticent wing of Anglicanism, I would rather have gone to the dentist without an anesthetic. However, the combination of my terrible times and my guest's sympathy weakened my resistance. So Mervyn did pray aloud, and I halfheartedly joined in on the "Amen." It was my first experience of one-on-one extempore oral prayer.

"Would you like me to come again?" asked Mervyn Thomas.

"Well . . . er . . . yes . . . no . . . I don't think this kind of thing is really my scene. . . . I mean, I wouldn't like to do it too often," I muttered.

"But I think you do need regular prayer support," was the gentle response.

Regular prayer support. It was the second time the phrase had crossed my horizon in just a few days. Its first appearance came in

a letter from a political acquaintance offering to convene a group of “friends from Parliamentary and public life” who would meet once a week to give me “regular prayer support.” The writer of this letter was Michael Alison. Good, solid, dependable old Michael. Eton, Cambridge, the Brigade of Guards, Tory MP, Junior Health Minister, Willie Whitelaw’s No. 2 as Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Margaret Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, Privy Councillor, Church Commissioner, and a much respected senior legislator. I was on friendly terms with him, but not close. A few months earlier I had asked him if a press story saying that he had refused a knighthood was true. “Well, yes, I didn’t really feel worthy of it,” was his reply, which I thought bordered on the eccentric considering how many far less worthy Parliamentary colleagues collect their “Ks” with the rations.

I knew Michael was a practicing Christian because he was a regular attender at the Communion service for MPs held monthly in St Margaret’s, Westminster, followed afterward by breakfast in Speaker’s House. However, there were no clues from his self-effacing conversation at these events to suggest that Michael could be into “praying out loud” or any other deviations from traditional religion, such as forming groups to provide fallen sinners with “regular prayer support.” It sounded a step too far from the Church of England that I knew. So I stayed cool and reticent about the idea.

In their different ways, Mervyn Thomas and Michael Alison stayed warm and persistent. They had an unexpected American ally in Charles Colson, with whom I was exchanging deeply personal letters that summer. Notorious for being Richard Nixon’s “hatchet man” who had served a jail sentence for Watergate-related offenses, Colson had been a valuable source of new material for my 1993 biography of the thirty-seventh President of the United States. In my historical interviews with Colson about the goings-on in the Nixon White House, he had barely mentioned his post-Watergate conversion to a life of Christian faith and ministry. Even so, we struck up a good rapport, and he reviewed my book generously in the American press. However, we were no longer in touch with

each other until, by chance, Colson was staying in a London hotel on June 21, 1997, the day when I became front-page news as public enemy number one after being caught telling a lie on oath in the *Guardian* libel case.

Colson immediately wrote me a letter urging me to take the Christian path of repentance. Filled with remorse for my wrongdoing, I was receptive to his suggestion. However, I had no real understanding of the concept of repentance. I did not know the deeper meaning of the Greek word for it, *metanoia*, which translates as “a change of heart and mind.” I thought repentance consisted of saying sorry, preferably as quietly and as privately as possible, and then getting back to business as usual.

As my correspondence with Colson developed, he seemed to be suggesting a far less convenient approach to repentance. He recommended that I should “get a group of praying friends” around me to whom I should “become accountable.” He mentioned his own experiences—described in full in his 1976 autobiography, *Born Again*—of belonging to a group that consisted of a Senator, two Congressmen, and a Washington, D.C. pastor. This quartet breakfasted together once a week, “shared everything as brothers,” and “had fellowship”—whatever that was. This formula of born-again-ers sharing coffee, croissants, sins, and Bible reading had no appeal for me. My religion was private and was going to stay that way.

For some weeks there was a tug-of-war in my spiritual life between privacy and fellowship. It was resolved not by evangelical Protestants but by Roman Catholics. Long before I was in any kind of trouble I had developed a friendship with Father Gerard Hughes, SJ, the author of *God of Surprises*. We had met when my political star was in the ascendant and the skies of my ambition seemed cloudless. At that time I was so keen on worldly success that I was not particularly receptive to what he called “spiritual direction.” However, there must have been the seeds of a latent spiritual hunger buried somewhere deep within me. For against my natural instincts and in defiance of the pressures of a Cabinet Minister’s schedule, Father Hughes somehow persuaded me to participate in the first

ever Parliamentary Retreat during Lent 1994, a commitment that meant setting aside several hours a week for the various activities this involved.

During the retreat we talked a lot about prayer, which Father Hughes defined as “daring to make the inner journey.” Later he added that there are times in the journey when one needs companions and there are times when one needs to pray alone. On that basis there was no need for any tug-of-war between what my self-defense mechanism called “private religion” and what Colson, Alison, and Thomas variously called “fellowship,” “prayer partnership,” or “prayer support group” religion. Even so I was still equivocal about getting involved with such novel (for me) activities, until one night I was reading a lecture on prayer by Evelyn Underhill who quoted some advice from a sixteenth-century Catholic mystic, St. Teresa of Avila. The advice was, “when you start to pray, get yourself some company.” This sentence hit me like a killer punch, knocking out my already fading resistance to Michael Alison’s proposal of “a prayer support group” to help me through my troubles.

The group that duly convened for breakfast, Bible reading, and prayer every Thursday morning consisted of what appeared to be a gathering of reserved, cautious, and determinedly nonintrusive Englishmen. In alphabetical order we were: Jonathan Aitken, Michael Alison, Tom Benyon (all ex-MPs); Alastair Burt, a sitting MP; Anthony Cordle, the son of a former MP; Michael Hastings, a senior BBC executive; James Pringle, a retired businessman; and, later on, Mervyn Thomas. How Michael Alison got this lot together remains something of a mystery. I myself knew none of them well and three of them not at all. The only common denominator was that they were all willing to turn up once a week to pray for someone in trouble.

Although my troubles were getting steadily worse, unfolding into the nightmare scenario of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy, and jail, the dynamics of this prayer group soon took on a life that went deeper and wider than the Aitken dramas.

Until I joined this group, my idea of praying was to say the

Lord's Prayer, occasionally adding one or two "Lord, help me!" mumbles of an entirely self-centered nature. On a bad day I might possibly open the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and read whichever of its versicles, responses, prayers, or collects seemed particularly appropriate to my circumstances. Although some of the BCP's liturgical creations have great power and beauty, such a formal style of prayer can easily become stilted and depersonalized. So I was ready to enlarge my prayer horizons even if the new prayer techniques to which I was being introduced came as quite a surprise.

The most regular of these techniques was to go around the table at our Thursday breakfasts, asking, "What are your prayer needs?" Once we had broken through the barriers of British reserve with each other, this question brought to the surface all manner of replies in areas such as family worries, job or money pressures, personal relationship problems, and so on. "What are your prayer needs?" may sound a mundane question, but the oral prayers that flowed from it were sometimes remarkable, as were the answers to those prayers.

We were fortunate that our group included some experienced believers with great gifts of prayer. For example, James Pringle, who had a voice like a cello and an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, had rare skills in linking our prayer requests to passages of Scripture. Mervyn Thomas, an experienced Baptist pastor, brought a Pentecostal fervor to prayer that I had never before experienced. Michael Alison changed from a pillar of the Anglican establishment into a sage of Reformed theology (a subject he had studied at Ridley Hall, Cambridge), using his learning to lead our Bible readings with great expertise. The rest of us joined in with far less scriptural knowledge and devotional experience, but even so, the totality of the group's prayerfulness somehow felt powerful.

These Thursday breakfasts made two important impacts on me. The first was that the word *brothers*, or in its longer form *brothers in Christ*, took on a real meaning. Although we were very different characters, our unity of purpose turned us into a fraternal group of loving prayer partners within a matter of weeks. Jesus' words,

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20) cast their own mantle over us all, so much so that there were times during our prayers when I felt his presence to be near. This strong feeling of being part of a brotherhood of Christ’s followers had its effect on my prayers. I stopped asking for God’s holy electrical energy to come down from the skies to solve my problems, to stop me from being prosecuted, going to jail, losing my house, and so on. Instead, I prayed for my brothers (whose private troubles sometimes seemed almost as needful as my public torments) and for the requests they had made on behalf of their families, their friends, and their situations. This seismic shift away from self-centered prayer toward praying for others was swiftly followed by the second impact of belonging to the group. The more I heard about Jesus Christ from our Bible studies and prayers, the greater became my desire to learn more about him. I felt his powerful attraction, perhaps even his call (though I did not recognize it at the time), and so I prayed to get to know him better.

This new shift toward God-seeking prayer met with an unexpected response from Michael Alison. He told me that he had been a former churchwarden of a leading evangelical church in London—Holy Trinity, Brompton—which ran classes in Christian teaching called Alpha courses. He said I should do one. At that time I had heard neither of the church, nor of the course. But I trusted Michael, so at his instigation I went to see the vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton. He was not the rabid hot-gospeler I had somehow been expecting to meet. He was a reassuringly avuncular figure, the Rev. Sandy Millar whom, forty years earlier, I had thought of as an icon because when I was a small boy at Eton he had been a school prefect and legendary figure. As the heroes of one’s youth can be the heroes of one’s life, it did not seem as strange as it might otherwise have done for me to be sitting in Sandy’s vicarage study receiving his godly wisdom, which seemed to come down to, “If you’re serious about having a relationship with Jesus, you should come and do an Alpha course here at HTB.”

When I found out what an Alpha course was, I did everything I

could to avoid it. A cover story in *The Spectator* by Christina Odone on Alpha was published a week before the 1997 autumn course began. It was a hatchet job, caricaturing Alpha as an extremist sect for the Hooray Henrys and Henriettas of Chelsea and Kensington who enjoyed swooning in the aisles, confessing their sins in groups, and empowering themselves with the Holy Spirit to make more money. I promptly tried to back out of the course I had signed up for, but a surprisingly steely Michael Alison persuaded me to stick to the plan. As I was still wavering on the night the Alpha course began, his persuasion took the form of physically escorting me to Holy Trinity, Brompton, where I felt out of place, uncomfortable, and unpleasantly notorious. The only reason I could think of for being there was that I had made a bad call of judgment out of good manners to Michael Alison and Sandy Millar.

I found the Alpha course far more orthodox, interesting, and congenial than I had expected. These reactions had much to do with the quality of the talks given by the Alpha chaplain, Nicky Gumbel, and the normality of the people who were in our group, which was led by Bruce Streater, a lawyer and amateur golfing champion who in time was to become one of my closest friends. However, despite the good preaching of Gumbel and the good company of Streater, I do not think I would have lasted for the duration of the ten-week course had it not been for the fifth talk, entitled “How Do I Pray?” It was given, not by an ordained clergyman, but by a young woman in a miniskirt named Jo Glenn. It was her message rather than her miniskirt that captivated me, for by the end of the evening my searchings had taken a new turn toward something my spiritual life had sorely lacked—prayer discipline.

What the “How Do I Pray?” talk of the Alpha course suggested was that prayer can benefit from having a structure. The one recommended was a four-part structure under the headings Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Other ideas included setting a fixed time each day for prayer, keeping a prayer diary, and persevering with prayer through all disappointments and setbacks. I cannot explain why Jo Glenn’s talk spoke to me, but it did. I tried

her recommendations, and they started to work. Within days I was settling down to a regular, disciplined prayer life using the ACTS format.

Although I did not understand it at the time, the Alpha course talk on prayer had set me off on a momentous journey. One of my first discoveries was that each one of the initials in the ACTS acronym requires a voyage of exploration of its own. So I began with Adoration, a spiritual subject I had hitherto considered for approximately two seconds a year on Christmas Day when singing the “O come let us adore him” line from “O Come All Ye Faithful.”

But what is adoration? I now think of it as the starter motor of prayer, the energizer of all our requests and communications to God. For how can we hope to receive our Lord’s gifts and mercies if we fail to transmit to him our love, reverence, and praise? If one believes this, one starts to search for the right thoughts and language with which to express adoration. Soon my prayer diary was filling up with my own and other people’s attempts at responding to this challenge. As a result, a selection of prayers of adoration fills the first twenty pages of the main body of this book.

T. S. Eliot wrote in his poem, *The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock*: “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” While I was in politics, I measured out my life in coffee mornings. As my spiritual life began to take off, I measured it out in prayer notebooks.

Keeping a prayer notebook, or diary, is a chore at the time but a joy afterward. It is also a great strengthener of faith to turn back the pages years later and to see how many of one’s prayer requests have been answered, although not necessarily in the way or time-scale originally asked for. However, at the time when the notebook is being written, one immediate blessing is the noting down of appropriate Bible passages as well as prayers by authors ranging from first-century saints to twenty-first-century evangelists. The paths trodden by such masters of prayer are well worth following, and I hope I have reaped from them a rich harvest of what

Shakespeare called “other men’s flowers” when compiling the various sections of this book.

For all its strengths, the Adoration-Confession-Thanksgiving-Supplication formula has its omissions and weaknesses. Perhaps the most glaring omissions are prayers of contemplation. As these usually take place in silence, it would be difficult to devote many pages to them in a book of this kind. However, as I mention in relation to the *Three Crucial Questions* prayer on page 132, some of my own deepest moments of discovery have come from going down the contemplative path. In particular the nine-day silent retreat I did on the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises under Father Gerard Hughes’s direction in 1998 was another major turning point on my journey.

Prayer needs to be balanced between the inward swing of contemplation and the outward swing of action. In this context action can include doing, serving, or praying in accordance with God’s will. For me, at that time action meant preparing to go to prison since I had already confirmed my intention to plead guilty to charges of perjury arising out of the *Guardian* libel action. So my most frequent prayer request was, “Lord, help me survive in prison.” It turned out to be a prayer well answered.

On the first morning of my prison sentence, June 9, 1999, I awoke at 5:30 A.M. and wondered how I would survive the coming day. HMP Belmarsh was notorious for being “a tough nick,” and it had lived up to its reputation on the night of my arrival with dozens of its inmates participating in an obscene chant on the theme of “Let’s Get Aitken Tomorrow.” Among the noisiest vocalists in the chant were the neighbors on my wing landing. Occupying the cells immediately to the left and right of me were a couple of prisoners who seemed to have cast themselves in the role of cantors. After helpfully identifying my precise location in their sing-song voices, they would shout a question such as “What shall we do to Aitken (or Aitken’s private parts) tomorrow?” From the other three sides of the exercise yard came a thunder of unprintable responses.

Although my blood ran cold when I first heard these raucous exchanges, the combination of physical exhaustion, saying a prayer,

and reading a psalm<sup>1</sup> caused me to fall asleep before the shouting had run its course. But the memory of these menacing obscenities came back all too vividly as I began to think about the day ahead.

In contrast to the cacophony of the night before, the stillness of the morning after felt amazingly peaceful. Belmarsh was as quiet as a becalmed battleship. Its silence was strangely conducive to prayer. As I took in my immediate surroundings, I remember thinking, *Now I can see why monks down the centuries have found cells such good places to pray in.* Confronted with the stark reality of being shut inside a 12 x 8-foot concrete-walled box, whose main features were iron bars, iron door, iron bed, chair, table, and toilet, I realized that life could only be livable in these claustrophobic surroundings if one's spiritual heart and mind were in the right place. So I turned to God and prayed.

Prayer discipline works. My brain might have been whirling in a thousand different directions, but I settled down into the routine of the ACTS structure I had been using ever since the Alpha course of October 1997. For obvious reasons I remember those particular morning prayers well, as usual recording them in my diary.

First came Adoration. What could there be to adore in God's glory and creation from a cell in Belmarsh? A nanosecond after asking this silly question I looked up through the bars and saw the most wonderful cobalt blue sky with the first rays of matinal sunlight dancing like golden ballerinas across the gray rooftops of the adjacent cellblocks. One of the short adoration prayers I had learned came to mind: "O God, be exalted above the heavens: let your glory shine over all the earth."

Next came Confession. I began with a familiar plea: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. Look well if there are any wrongful ways in me, and lead me in your way everlasting." Usually this prayer, from Psalm 139, brings up sinful junk by the bucketful. On this day it produced nothing. This was absurd. Here was I on my first morning in prison and I couldn't think of anything to confess! Was I praying in the wrong way? Of course, the sins for which I was being punished had long ago been

confessed to God. But even so, the idea that the previous day had been a sinless one was ridiculous. So I redoubled my efforts to bring to mind my sins. Still nothing happened.

Then an interesting thought came along. Tuesday, June 8 had been a day on which many people were praying for me. I knew this from the breakfast prayers the Alison group members and others such as Charles Colson had said for me before we set off from my home to the Old Bailey. I knew it from the letters I had received that morning from complete strangers and from old friends and even a hand-delivered note sent round from Lambeth Palace by Archbishop George Carey. I knew it from looking up from the dock of Court No. 1 of the Old Bailey at the public gallery just before the judge passed sentence. There I saw Lord Longford, Father Norman Brown of Westminster Cathedral, and James Pringle sitting in the front row. All three had their eyes closed, so I guessed they were praying. Putting these various fragments together, I began to wonder if the reason why I had nothing to confess was that throughout the previous day I had been protected and guided by the supernatural forces of prayer.

Then I turned to Thanksgiving. At first glance there might seem to be precious little to give thanks for if you are locked up in Britain's highest security prison on the first day of your sentence. Not so. For some reason I dredged up from my memory William Law's advice about gratitude to God:

If anyone could tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and perfection, he must tell you to make it a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing.

These seventeenth-century words set me off on a count-your-blessings exercise. There was a huge list of things to thank God for—his love, his forgiveness, his gift of a new life in Christ, even his chastenings. There were all sorts of practical reasons for gratitude too. The judge's eighteen-month sentence had been fair. My friends

and prayer partners were wonderful. My family's morale, and my own, had held up better than expected. One way and another, thanking God came easily.

Moving on to Supplication, or asking, my children's needs were the top priority, followed by a handful of people whose serious illness or other difficulties made their plights even worse than mine. I also prayed for peace with the editor of *The Guardian* and other journalists. These supplications ended by praying over some verses from Psalm 91. This is a great plea for God's protection from enemies, something I badly needed in the light of the previous evening's chantings and threatenings.

My prayers were interrupted by shouts of "Unlock! Everybody out!" This was the daily wake-up call to the inmates of Belmarsh from its prison officers as they came down the wings unlocking our cell doors and ordering us to stand on the landings for the morning roll call. As I stepped out of my cell I remembered that the noisiest vocalists of the night before had been my immediate neighbors to my right and left. So I literally trembled as I stood on the landing beside them until it emerged that their nocturnal hostility had changed into amiability.

"G'morning," said one of them, "'ope you slept well. Sorry about last night. We were on the tackle [drugs]. Just lettin' off steam."

"Yeah, nothing personal, mate," said the other. "Let's 'ave a rosie together at association" (a cup of tea at tea-break time).

As my eyes started to become accustomed to the landscape of prison, I was surprised by many more unexpected discoveries. The first was how young everyone seemed to be. The average age of a British prisoner is twenty-three. So Belmarsh, like other big London prisons, has many teenagers within its walls. My second observation was the extraordinary availability and common usage of drugs. The third was that beneath the surface of these outwardly macho young men lurked a lot of human vulnerability.

One aspect of this vulnerability appeared on the second day of my sentence when a young black prisoner came up to me and said,

“I’ve just had a letter from me brief, but I can’t read it. Would you do us a favor and read it?”

The letter I read aloud was a threatened eviction notice from the Lambeth Council. After some discussion it emerged that the prisoner’s brother could take care of it by paying off the arrears in installments. “Okay, let’s tell the council that,” said my new friend, whose name was Stokesey. “But I can’t write either. Could you write it for me?”

So I wrote an appropriate letter to the Lambeth Council, and Stokesey signed it. He was so delighted that he skipped away holding the envelope above his head, declaring at the top of his voice, “That MP geezer’s got fantastic joined-up writing.”

This commercial for my graphological skills fell on the ears of a surprisingly receptive audience, for approximately one third of British prisoners are unable to read or write. They often conceal this vulnerability from each other, but it is revealed in the literacy tests all prisoners have to take at the beginning of their sentences. So an older prisoner who is willing to volunteer for the role of an amanuensis soon becomes a useful member of the community. What I could never have predicted was that my usefulness would lead to the starting up of a prison prayer group.

During the early weeks of my sentence I did a lot of letter reading and writing. At first this was the cause of some humor. One day an old convict came up to me and said, “Jonno, do you realize you is havin’ a fantastic impact on the girls of Brixton? They can’t believe the sudden improvement in the quality of their love letters.”

Whatever was or was not happening among the ladies of Brixton, I got quite a few signs and comments of appreciation from my fellow prisoners. One of them was an Irish burglar, unsurprisingly called Paddy. He invited me into his cell for coffee and made a little speech of thanks. “On behalf of the lads I’d really like to thank you for all the letter writing you’ve done for us,” he began, “and I’d like to give you a present to say how much we appreciate it. So you can have anything you like—free of charge—from me library.”

At this point Paddy dived underneath the left-hand side of

his bed and brought up an amazing selection of hard-core porn magazines.

“No, thank you,” I said, obviously reverting to the persona of a pompous politician because Paddy took umbrage.

“Too good for you, eh?” he said with a bitter edge to his voice. Before I had time to reply, Paddy’s fertile mind thought up an ingenious explanation for my refusal.

“Ooh . . . if it’s boys you’re after,” he said, now diving under the right-hand side of the bed and coming up with an alternative selection of hard porn pictures.

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “I used to like the first sort of magazines you showed me, but these days I’m trying a different path in life.”

“So what kind of path would that be?” asked Paddy.

“Well, if you really want to know, it’s the path of praying to Jesus and obeying his teachings,” I replied. “It’s a path that has changed my life.”

A long silence spread over us in that cell. It was eventually broken by Paddy who in a slow voice said the unexpected words, “You know, I’d really like to try that path myself.”

Before I could respond, the floodgates opened within Paddy, and he poured out a litany of woes describing all that was wrong with his present path of life. Much of his misery came from the kinds of complaints that are often heard in the world of freedom.

“There’s no meaning to my life . . . my wife doesn’t understand me . . . all I care about is money, and when I’ve got it, there’s no point to it . . . my relationships keep going wrong . . . my life’s just empty . . . totally unfulfilled.”

After much more in this vein Paddy ended by saying, “Me nan [grandmother] used to believe in Jesus, and she really had something. I can see that you’ve got something. So I’d like to try that path myself. I really would.”

One of my self-imposed survival rules in prison was that I had resolved never to talk about religion. Before I went inside, an ex-prisoner had warned me that “Jesus freaks sometimes get served

up [beaten up].” So I had kept my prayers for the privacy of my own cell, until this moment. Now I realized that I had to respond to Paddy. So it was my turn to create a long pause between us, until I finally said, “Well, Paddy, if you feel that way, why don’t we say a prayer together?” I had moved a long way since the days when I thought that praying out loud would be worse than going to the dentist without an anesthetic.

So we prayed. First night, second night, third night. Then Paddy, who had in him the qualities of a good recruiting sergeant, decided that our two-man prayer partnership needed to be expanded. So he went off recruiting and came back with two or three of his friends, then two or three more, and then still more. Before we knew where we were, we had gathered together about twelve young men in a rather unusual prayer group—so unusual that it gave a new meaning to the Christian term “a cell group.”

We started off in considerable embarrassment. “How do we pray?” someone asked. Hesitantly I described the ACTS structure. By the time I had finished I thought no one had understood my explanation. Then a Nigerian prisoner leapt in with a passionate extempore prayer on why he adored the Lord Jesus. We were off and running.

Far from being the tutor of the group, I was its greatest learner and beneficiary. Until my time in prison I had prayed from my lips. It was my fellow prisoners who taught me how to pray from the heart.

Their examples showed me how little prayer has to do with the human activity of polishing words and phrases that we think are appropriate for addressing God. What my prison prayer partners instinctively knew was that prayer is a supernatural activity in which we rely on God to enter our hearts and let our feelings rise up to him in words, occasionally in silences, which he inspires. In retrospect, it seems extraordinary that I had to go into a prison cell to learn these facts of prayer life.

Once I understood why my “experienced” prayers were less powerful than the “inexperienced” prayers of my fellow prisoners,

a new impetus came to my prayer life. Take Confession. Saying it with your lips is not enough. Changing your life with your heart, away from what you have confessed, is an essential part of the process. As John the Baptist urged his followers, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8). The conflicting forces of good and evil cause struggles in every human heart. As I participated in prayer with those who were struggling against, say, the inability to forgive, I became much harder on my own failures in this area. This particular problem was solved for me by the advice of a Benedictine monk whom I met when he was walking around the exercise yard of Belmarsh dispensing pastoral advice. I told him of the problem I was having over unforgiveness, particularly toward one or two journalists who persisted in writing complete fiction about me. “Pray to receive the gift of forgiveness,” said the monk, “and when you receive it, give the gift back to those toward whom you feel unforgiving.” So I prayed, and weeks later it all happened just as the monk had said it would. My unwillingness to forgive rolled off my shoulders and has not troubled me again since.

One of the most difficult areas of Supplication in our prison prayer group was drug addiction. The jails of Britain are awash with horse, charlie, coover, tackle, and a dozen other exotically named derivatives of heroin and cocaine. The prices are low, the dealers are persistent, and the flesh is weak. But in some cases prayer was an enormous help to young men who wanted to break their habit and stay clean. Most of them had done Narcotics Anonymous courses of one kind and another that referred to the need for the help of “a higher power.” What does this phrase mean in the context of secular NA or AA courses? At least a Christian prayer group can answer the question by praying for the power of the Holy Spirit to come into a drug user’s heart and transform his weak will so that it harmonizes with God’s will. Also the accountability factor in a group of prayer partners can be a huge support in weaning drug users off their habit.

Drugs were only one of the pressures that caused turbulence in the lives of the members of our prison prayer group. We all had

family worries, relationship problems, temptations, character failures, special situations, and a mass of other baggage to bring before God. “And who the \_\_\_\_\_ is God anyway?” one inmate asked aggressively. Some of the answers to this question can be found in Scripture. We had a terrific discussion in the group one night about God as revealed in Psalm 139. Another line of answer can be supplied by the doctrine of the Trinity. Even after two years of study at an Oxford theological college I am not sure I can explain the concept of a three-person God. But I understood it when I listened to the prayers of my fellow prisoners. For some of these young men would address their prayers to God the Father, not least because they had never known who their earthly fathers were. However, they knew they wanted a paternal presence bringing support, stability, discipline, and fatherly love to their lives. Others prayed to God the Son because they knew they needed to relate to Jesus and what he offered—compassion, forgiveness, healing, and a love for sinners. And others prayed for the power of the Holy Spirit to come in and transform their lives so that they could turn away from crime, drugs, anger, and other demons.

This journey of prayer in prison was a journey of change. It was spiritual life in the raw, stripping away much of my own protective defenses that had separated me from God and my neighbors in the past. I am not the best judge of how much it changed me. All I can say for sure is that I came to love God and to love my neighbors (not all of them easily lovable people!) far more than I had ever done before. That gain from prayer life as a convict now seems far more fulfilling than the prizes of public life as a Cabinet Minister. So for that reason, although it amazes many people, I now say from the heart, “Thank you, God, for sending me to prison.”

One last reflection on my prison prayer life: In the fifty-seven years of my existence before being driven through the gates of HMP Belmarsh, I had enjoyed many interesting, exciting, happy experiences in a varied and crowded career. Yet none of them gave me as much excitement, joy, and fulfillment as my experiences in prison of

coming closer to God in solitary prayer and bringing others closer to him in group prayer.

These prison prayer experiences were so intense that I probably needed a period of decompression from them after my release in January 2000. Unless you are a full-time minister, spiritual counselor, or member of a religious order, it is simply not possible to spend several hours each day praying, either alone or with other people. Nevertheless, on a reduced scale, my prayer disciplines continued after I reentered the world of freedom. The Michael Alison group, which had continued to meet every Thursday morning for breakfast in my home while I was away, welcomed me back. Strengthened in its membership by Brian, a fellow Old Belmarshian, and David Christie, a fellow Old Etonian, these brothers helped me through a difficult period of readjustment.

The next big milestone on my journey of prayer was entering Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. I do not think I fully appreciated at the time quite what a big risk Wycliffe was taking in admitting me as a student. For I remained a high-profile, controversial, and colorful target for the media, which continued to present me in a negative light. My journey of faith, parts of which I had attempted to describe in its pre-prison phase in an autobiography, *Pride and Perjury*, was greeted with much cynicism. To make matters worse, Wycliffe had admitted an ex-prisoner as a student in the previous academic year, and the experiment had failed badly. At least that failure had been veiled in obscurity, but any comparable weaknesses by me would be guaranteed maximum publicity. So the college was nervous about its reputation, and I was hesitant about committing myself to two years of full-time study there. With both sides fluttering in our respective dovecotes, Michael Alison again showed his steel. After much prayer he put heart into me and backbone into the Wycliffe tutors. The result was that in October 2000 I became an Oxford University undergraduate for the second time in my life.

Reading theology at Wycliffe, forty years after reading law at Christ Church, was a very different Oxford experience. In an after-dinner speech I later described the culture change by saying,

“At Wycliffe, I rise soberly and early in the morning, saying ‘Good morning, God.’ At Christ Church I used to fall out of bed with a hangover at around noon saying ‘Good God, morning?’”

Early-rising Wycliffe gave me two of the most enriching years of my life. Its academic standards were demanding, but its community life was loving. Most of my fellow students were training to be ordained ministers in the Church of England or other overseas churches. I was one of a small handful of publicans and sinners reading theology for their own (in my case unknown) purposes. When asked to explain what I was doing at an Anglican theological college I would answer, “Trying to get to know God better.”

If I succeeded in this objective, it was not through passing examinations in New Testament Greek, Church History, Christian Doctrine, and Biblical Knowledge of the Old and New Testaments. It was through prayer. For it was the prayer life of Wycliffe that carried me into new and enthralling spiritual territory.

The highlights of my week were the tutored fellowship group sessions and the student-only cell group meetings. My fellowship group was led jointly by the Principal of the College, Professor Rev. Dr. Alister McGrath, and by the Rev. Michael Green. From these two great scholars I learned to love God as he reveals himself through Scripture. The primacy of the Word is heavily emphasized in an evangelical seminary, but Wycliffe encourages its students to range widely and deeply into studying the lives and writings of past saints. So Alister McGrath encouraged me to read Augustine, Clement, Julian of Norwich, Lancelot Andrewes, Thomas à Kempis, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, William Law, John Calvin, Ignatius of Loyola, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many others whose prayers appear in these pages. Michael Green took me out into the world on missions to all sorts of communities, national and international, training me and my Wycliffe classmates to put our newly acquired knowledge into practice as student evangelists. Prayer was central to this mission work, as it was in the daily life of the college in our cell groups and in our individual prayer partnerships.

Two individual prayer partners became very special to me dur-

ing my two years at Oxford, possibly because they were older men with backgrounds and past careers to which I could easily relate.

The first of these was someone who had nothing to do with Wycliffe. He was Sir Andrew Green, who had retired from a distinguished diplomatic career with the Oxfordshire village of Deddington. Our paths had previously crossed in Whitehall and in British Embassies abroad. Somehow we reconnected and became aware that we were again traveling on similar paths—this time of Christian searching. We began meeting and praying together on a regular basis. I credit Andrew with keeping me “earthed” in the real world at a time when, without his intellectual and practical companionship in prayer, I might have become over-religious and taken myself too seriously in spiritual matters about which I still know far too little. Andrew may credit me with giving him prayer support when he was founding Migrationwatch UK, a now famous think tank that monitors Britain’s elusive immigration statistics. I know that Andrew’s work for Migrationwatch is deeply rooted in his Christian faith and spiritual integrity.

My second individual prayer partner was fellow Wycliffe student Paul Zaphiriou, whom I had first met in the Alpha Course at Holy Trinity, Brompton, in 1997. Then he was a successful businessman. Now he is an ordained Church of England clergyman at St George the Martyr in Holborn, London. He opened my eyes to his earlier spiritual heritage in the Orthodox Church, and it is his influence that has led me to some of the Eastern prayers in this book. Paul and I have traveled far together. Among our many bonds was the fact that having arrived at Wycliffe as rather lonely and divorced middle-aged men, both of us found love and are now happily married.

For me, marriage was a huge leap of prayer and faith as well as of love. The sad divorce from my first wife, Lolicia, in 1998 (entirely my fault) had left me bruised. I resolved to stay celibate. For over five years, with one brief lapse, this resolution prevailed. Then by a series of coincidences Elizabeth Harris, with whom I had been romantically involved twenty-five years earlier, reentered my life.

After a number of chaste dinners and theater outings together we knew we were falling in love.

When I started to tell my Christian friends that I was thinking of getting married again to Elizabeth, their reactions were mixed. It did not help matters when the paparazzi began taking an interest in us. Gossip column coverage with colorful references to Elizabeth's former film-star husbands Rex Harrison and Richard Harris produced pained letters from Christian well-wishers, some of which read more like the correspondence of ill-wishers. Elizabeth became unsettled, particularly after a visit to a big evangelical church in North Oxford, St Andrew's Linton Road, where my talk was followed by some sanctimonious questions about our relationship.

Such hostility was upsetting, but it was more than balanced by the tender loving care of my closest prayer partners. Their main concern seemed to be: Would Elizabeth be a supportive companion on my spiritual journey? Would we be partners in prayer as well as in marriage?

Although I felt sure the answer was yes, I committed the questions to prayer, not least with Elizabeth herself. We became regular churchgoers at St Matthew's, Westminster, whose sensitive and sympathetic vicar, Father Philip Chester, was a tower of support to us. He married us in St Matthew's in June 2003. Elizabeth's faith is more private but just as committed as my own. We now pray together every night of our lives. As the dedication to this book says, she is my nearest, dearest, and closest prayer partner. I thank God daily for her.

One development in my prayer life for which Elizabeth is responsible is that I now enlarge the ACTS structure into the longer acronym, ACTORS. The additional letters, OR, stand for "Our Relationship," which means our relationship with God. I have learned on my journey that whatever life's pressures may be, a committed relationship with God in prayer is the answer to all of them. As this relationship is constantly developing, it seems appropriate to have a separate category of prayer under this heading, hence the section *Prayers for Our Relationship with God* in this book.

Although my journey of prayer has been a momentous one across extraordinarily varied scenes and settings, this introduction must end on a note of humility, for the journey is far from over. All I really know is how little I know about this vast subject. So I am extremely cautious about making suggestions to other people on how to organize their prayer life when I have so much to learn about my own.

We are all learners in prayer. Novices can often be better at it than so-called experts. God's ear is tuned to all voices and ways of praying to him. So we should pray as we can, not as how this or any other book tells us to.

That said, some paths of prayer signposted in these pages are well tried and true. Travelers along such paths may be a much larger multitude than the statistics of religion suggest. For, interestingly, the opinion polls tell us that although less than 10 percent of the people in contemporary Britain go to church, over 90 percent of them say a prayer from time to time. The practice of prayer is, therefore, far greater than the practicing of religion.

Since direct communication with God in prayer is surely the truest path for a spiritual journey, my final prayer is that this small book may help others along that path and be for the greater glory of God.

## N O T E S

1. See my book *Psalms for People Under Pressure*, p. xii.