

HEAR MY VOICE

A PRISON PRAYER BOOK

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INVITATION INTO PRAYER

WELCOME TO THIS RESOURCE

The title of this book, *Hear My Voice* (Psalm 130:2), is itself a prayer for difficult times. It can be a plea: “Please, God, hear me!” It can be a challenge: “OK, God, if you’re really there, then listen to me!” It can be a cry of faith: “I know that you’re with me, Jesus, and that you’ll hear my voice when I call to you.” And it is, at the same time, *God’s* invitation to each of us. God says, “Hear *my* voice,” because God is always listening for our prayers and ready to respond.

What This Book Is About

This book is about praying to God and listening for God in prison. God is present in prison—after all, Jesus was condemned by the religious authorities of his day and arrested and executed by the Roman state. Many of Jesus’ followers through the centuries have faced imprisonment. So, prisons are outposts of heaven. They are places where the Holy Spirit is present and active, transforming lives and situations. Jesus Christ is on our side and by our side, no matter what hardships or challenges or enemies we face—including incarceration.

The brutal realities of this world often seem disconnected from God's love and justice. Yet, God's justice is the deeper truth. God's justice is about grace, forgiveness, hope, and new life. It is about restoring broken relationships and healing shattered hearts. God's justice is respect, fairness, and safety for every person. The penal system keeps people separated and apart. But God's vision for us is connection with Christ and one another, even when we sit in solitude or in solitary confinement.

Who This Book Is For

If you currently live in a prison, this book may help you deepen your walk with God. We hope it will be a companion for you as you live out your Christian faith on the inside. The writers of this book are currently or have been incarcerated or involved in prison or re-entry ministries. Hear *our* voices praying for you and with you.

If you are a family member or friend of someone who is incarcerated, you may find this book helpful. Use it to pray alongside your loved one, even though you are physically separated.

This book is also a call to the church and to every congregation to be in prayer and solidarity with people who are incarcerated. Jesus says that whenever we visit someone in prison, we visit him (Matthew 25:36, 40). We hope this book helps connect those inside prison with those outside, and those outside with those inside. We offer it in Jesus' name to all who may find it useful.

How to Use This Prayer Book

The prayers and liturgies here can be prayed alone in a jail cell or in a small group on the cell block. The seasons in the “Praying through the Year” section journey with Jesus over the course of the year from his birth through his ministry to his death and resurrection. “Praying through Ordinary Days” invites us into deepening friendship with Christ amid the realities of life in prison. Prayer patterns for morning and evening offer ways to pray throughout the day. The devotional practices offered in the rest of the book are suggestions to spark creativity in prayer. And the artwork offers a vision of God’s creative Spirit at work in each of us.

We want to honor the privacy of those who have shared their stories and experiences here. Therefore, throughout this book, all names of those in prison have been changed.

May the Spirit be with you, may Christ sustain you, and may God guide you every moment of every day. God says, “Hear my voice”:

“Do not be afraid.”

“I am with you.”

“I will help you.”

“I have called you by name.”

“You are my beloved child.”

“Come as you are and know that I am God.”

“I will never leave you or forsake you.”

How to Use This Section

This part of the book offers resources to help you pray your way through the seasons of the church year with your Christian siblings around the globe. Just start with whichever season of the church year you're in now. The chart in the back of the book (page 230) may help you determine that. Each seasonal piece begins with a short mantra-type prayer. These prayers can be said over and over to help you focus your thoughts on God throughout the day. Then spend time pondering the scripture passage and reflection for the day. The quotations offer insights to think about. The questions are intended to spark your own thoughts and prayers on the theme of the day. You may wish to pray the longer prayer and sing the song to end your prayer time. If the song isn't familiar to you, you might just pray it as a prayer-poem. Or feel free to choose your own song or to make up your own melodies to go with the words—just “make a joyful noise to the LORD!” (Psalm 100:1).

WHAT DO YOU WAIT FOR? ADVENT

Mantra Prayer

Wait with me, Lord. Guide my hope, tame my fear.

Scripture for Advent: Luke 1:39-44, 46-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection

I began collecting “waiting stories” in the prison where I was living. When I asked several inmates the question “What do you wait for?” nearly every one of them gave me a puzzled look of disinterested mockery, signaling irritation. “What kind of stupid question is that? It’s all about waiting. Prison is all about waiting. That’s what we do here.” But I persisted.

A lot of what they told me was predictable: I wait for mail, for a visit, for count, for library time, recreation time, meal time, canteen time . . . for the lawyer to call, the judge to decide, the committee to meet . . . for anything that will break the wretched, numbing boredom. For release!

Still, the more I asked, and the longer the inmates talked about waiting, the more I heard unexpected, soulful words. Words like *forgiveness, choices, worth, respect, meaning, hope, touch, love*. They were words that, for all their different consonants and vowels and syllables, sounded like the word “mercy.”

Advent means “coming.” If one word or one mood describes Advent, it might well be waiting. But waiting for what? Waiting is one part hope and another part fear; it can be a measure of wanting and a dose of dread. To encourage us in our waiting, we’ll explore this revolutionary passage about Mary and Elizabeth throughout this Advent section, as a companion for our question “What do you wait for?”

A Quote to Ponder

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. —Pierre Teilhard de Chardin²

A Question to Wonder About

What do you wait for?

Song

Canticle of the Turning

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
and my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant’s plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,
so from east to west shall my name be blest.
Could the world be about to turn?

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn.
Rory Cooney, b. 1952, based on the Magnificat³



In Death, There Is Yet Life

*You have been born anew...
through the living and
enduring word of God.*

—1 Peter 1:23

drop leaves in autumn, but we don't smell their fragrance or see their color. The sun rises and sets over days lived under horizons of guard towers and walls. I imagine borders of evergreen and see hedges of razor wire. Help me to be thankful for all the beauty of nature always: here where it is so sparse, and also in future days when I am free and it will be so obviously abundant. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Disappointment

Jesus, I dared to think of a better future, only to be denied. I raised my hopes, only to have them thrown down. When will your saving help come to me? When will your justice prevail? Suffering Jesus, you also have been denied. You have been thrown down. You have known injustice. Come to me now and walk with me through this dark valley. Comfort me in my disappointment, and raise up in me a hope that will not be shaken. I ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Anger

God of storm and calm, you reveal your own anger at injustice and all that brings harm, and where there is fury and offense, you show the way to peace. There is so much anger within and all around me. Help me to know and find the right use of anger, and free me from its power to enslave or misguide me, so that I may follow your way of justice and mercy. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Depression

Lord of hope, I am so depressed, sinking where even my own shadow won't stay by me. I don't know where to go, how to get help, or what to do. There is no one here that I trust. I'm afraid. I'm so tired of all this. I'm ready to give up. Is there help for me? Send me help. Lift me out of this heavy fog. Is there any

hope? Show me a reason to hope. Don't give up on me. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Fear

Almighty and powerful God, today I am afraid. I just feel scared. Sometimes I'm not even sure why. There are lots of reasons: Fights and ridicule. Cell searches, tickets, predators, thieves and snitches and cons. Guards that don't like me, bad news in the mail, nowhere for me to go when I get out. I don't know why—today I'm just scared. Make me strong enough and give me the courage to get through this. Help me. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Assaulted in prison

God, my refuge and my protector: You know what is happening to me here—the attacks. I feel weak and ashamed. I'm angry and sad and so afraid. This is a brutal place. I can't get away from the threats, the looks, and the bullying. I'm a target who can't breathe. I have no safe hiding place. Give me courage to get through this. Protect me, save me from this hell. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Mental health

God of heart, mind, and soul: It's hard for me to think clearly. I worry, I'm afraid, and I'm angry. Sleeping is a problem. The medicines they give me make me feel awful. I know something is wrong with me. I need help, but I fear that if I tell anyone, they won't care or they might use it against me. Help me know what to do. Calm me down, untangle this confusion, drive out my dark thoughts like you chased away bad spirits. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS: SEEING GOD IN ONE ANOTHER

For my cellmate

Gracious God, in these cells we live inches from one another hour by hour, month by month. Inspire me to see my cellmate, name, as a child of God created in your image and loved by you just as I am loved. When we need it, give us patience. When we lack it, provide understanding. When there is fault, teach us to be forgiving. In discord, grant fair resolution; in shortage, generosity; in worry, encouragement; and in need, support. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

For enemies

God of reconciliation, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to pray for them, and to do good even to those who hurt us. This is a hard teaching here, where we think of many as enemies. Show me, and all of us in prison, the power of your transforming love. Prevent acts of retribution, drive out destructive anger, and hinder the spirit of revenge. Give us the courage to follow where you lead. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

For friends

God among us, thank you for the gift of friends, those who have forgiven and loved me when I have not made it easy for them. Thank you for friends who stand by me and sacrifice for me, who show me support and give me encouragement. Help me in the same way to be a trustworthy friend to others, caring for their welfare and being worthy of their trust. Keep me from exploiting my friends. Keep me from failing to show gratitude for them. I ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

A LITURGY OF HEALING AND HOPE

How to Use This Section

This prayer service is for a group of people to pray together as they seek healing in some form:

- from drug or alcohol addiction;
- from sexual abuse or domestic violence;
- from discrimination based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity;
- from serious illnesses;
- from grief and depression, especially during holidays
- from any situation that calls for God's healing and restoration of hope.

The words that are spoken by a leader(s) are in regular type. Words spoken by all are in boldface type.

Gathering

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.⁵⁸

Isaiah 43:1-3, 5

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass

through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . . Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.

Silence

Psalms 86:1-12 (*read responsively by half verse*)

¹Bow down your ear, O LORD, and answer me,

for I am poor and in misery.

²Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful;

save your servant who trusts in you.

³Be merciful to me, O LORD, for you are my God;

I call upon you all the day long.

⁴Gladden the soul of your servant,

for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

⁵For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,

and abundant in mercy toward all who call upon you.

⁶Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer,

and attend to the voice of my supplications.

⁷In the time of my trouble I will call upon you,

for you will answer me.

⁸Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord,

nor anything like your works.

⁹All the nations you have made

will come and worship you, O Lord,

and glorify your name.

¹⁰For you are great; you do wondrous things;

and you alone are God.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth;

give me an undivided heart to revere your name.