

PRAYING
the CATECHISM

PRAYING *the* CATECHISM

Donald W. Johnson
and Susan C. Johnson

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION



AUGSBURG FORTRESS

PRAYING THE CATECHISM
Revised and Expanded Edition

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FOREWORD

My dad, Pastor Donald W. Johnson, wrote *Praying the Catechism* twenty-five years ago. At his funeral two years ago, the preacher invited us all to reread this book and to let my father continue to teach us. As I began to read again the words of Martin Luther and my father, the idea for this new edition entered my head.

I have long been concerned about the need for both a spiritual renewal in our churches and a focus on discipleship practices: prayer, scripture reading, diaconal service to those who are in need or are marginalized, stewardship of the earth and of our personal finances, the ability to comfortably share our faith. With increasingly busy lives we have lost much of the teaching function of the church. How then to help people learn how to pray and to walk more closely with God?

Martin Luther's Small Catechism was written to help people gather in their homes to learn about their faith and to deepen their relationship with God. The catechism still works as a solid framework for that purpose. Similarly, I was impressed with how well my father's words still speak to us even twenty-five years later.

In this edition of *Praying the Catechism*, I have updated some examples and language. Things have changed, both in our churches and in our societies, in the last quarter century! I have also added a prayer at the end of each day's devotion. As I have spoken to people across the church and around the world, I have found that there is great hesitancy about praying. People have told me that they don't know whether they are praying correctly. I get it; I used to worry about grammar police waiting to pounce on me. But over the years I have learned that there is no right way to pray—what a relief! My prayers are meant to be examples to help you begin praying each day. Talk to God honestly from your heart. That's all you need to do!

I write this during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. For most of us, daily life has changed dramatically. Lockdowns, wearing masks, self-isolating, social distancing, widespread unemployment, food insecurity and hunger, working from home, helping children with remote learning—it feels like a different world. Now more than ever, we need the comfort and strength of our faith. We need our relationship with God. I hope this book will help you to explore your faith, to deepen your prayer life, and to invigorate your relationship with God. Working on this new edition has strengthened my faith.

I am praying for you, and for all who seek to follow the Holy One, in Jesus' name. Amen.

+ Susan C. Johnson
National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
February 2021

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, faced the challenge of education for lay people. To meet this challenge, he wrote a catechism for use in family prayer and in private meditation. For many years his work has been used in this manner and has had a profound influence on the life of the church.

In more recent years Luther's Small Catechism, with its discussion of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar, has been used for teaching. Taking the catechism from the prayer room to the classroom has changed it, however, for it has become a focus of indoctrination rather than a focus of devotion.

This devotional book is an attempt to restore the Small Catechism to the prayer room. It invites you to experience the catechism through a journey of prayer and meditation. Along with the catechism, passages from scripture and from the liturgies of baptism and the eucharist are used as a starting point for some meditations.

This book was written to be a part of the Adult Catechumenate Program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, for adults preparing for baptism. It is divided into two sections that may be used approximately forty days before and fifty days after baptism. If baptism is to occur at the Easter Vigil, the two sections are especially appropriate for the seasons of Lent and Easter, respectively. It is hoped that people preparing to affirm their faith, whether old or young, might find this book helpful.

It is also hoped that this book will be used by individuals and families as part of devotional life. In this case, the book may be used in its ninety-day entirety, or the devotions may be undertaken through the six sections of the catechism: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar.

This book has been written for the community of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, North Vancouver, British Columbia. I wish to thank the members of this parish who have provided generous feedback as this book was being prepared. Three people deserve special thanks: Lois Johnson, Erika Kingston, and Lois Grierson, for their help in editing and typing.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR DAILY USE

You are invited to enter a journey of daily prayer and meditation. This is an important discipline in the Christian life. It is not always easy. There are six meditations for each week, from Monday to Saturday. Each Sunday you are encouraged to join the members of your parish for prayer in worship.

Begin each day by recognizing that you are in the presence of God. Ask God to help and guide you in your daily time of prayer. Always seek to discover God's graciousness in the day.

Follow this by reading the quotation at the beginning of each meditation and taking a moment for reflection. What do these words say to you at this time in your life?

When you are ready, go on to the "Pause and Reflect" section of the meditation. You may again ponder how this touches your life. In what way is the God of grace speaking to you today?

If you are reading this prayer book within the context of a family or household, you may wish to use this time for some group discussion.

Close each period of meditation with prayer. Use the prayer suggestions as you wish, but you will soon discover that there is much more for you to pray about.

What length of time should you take for each period of prayer? Find out what works best for you, and do not rush. Take time to enjoy being in the presence of God.

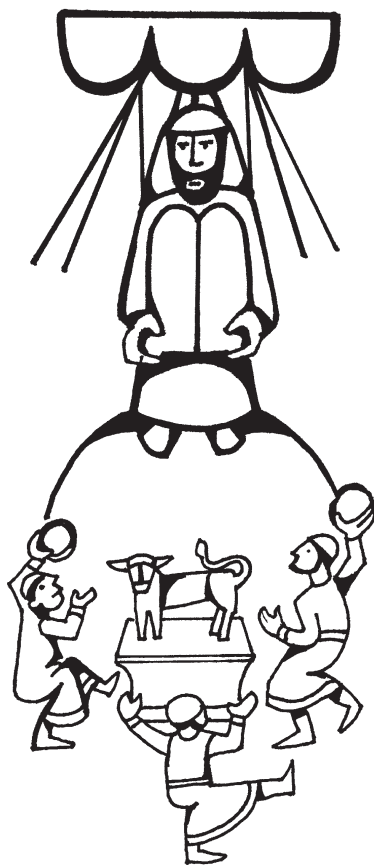
You may be a part of a community of people preparing for baptism or for the service of Affirmation of Baptism. Pray for them each day, and participate in the fellowship of prayer with them.

This book comes with space for you to write or cartoon your responses. This will help you to look back over the week and recall what has been happening within you. If you are using this book with others, these are some of the things that you might be able to share with that group.

To pray is to learn to love God and enjoy the presence of God. To pray is to learn to watch for the things that are happening within you and around you each day, and to come to see them as part of the gifts of God. To pray is to anticipate God's blessing.

NO OTHER GODS . . .

The Ten Commandments



DAY I, MONDAY

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Exodus 20:2

PAUSE AND REFLECT

God speaks to Moses: *Remember, first, that I am the God who has rescued you.* In light of this great rescue, the commandments are then given. This same mysterious God spoke to Moses earlier in the burning bush, saying, *I have heard the people's cries. I know their suffering and I will rescue them.* At the heart of the ten commandments and of this covenant is the God of compassion who delivers people.

We all have some type of image of God. For some, the ten commandments evoke an image of judgment, strict discipline, or punishment for stepping over the line. The ten commandments, however, begin with a word about the God who rescues. First God rescues us, then speaks the ten commandments.

In what ways has God rescued you? What gifts of deliverance has God given you? You may remember times in your life when you experienced God's hand of deliverance.

Where are you still struggling to be freed? From racism? From transphobia or homophobia? From gender oppression? From workaholism? From addiction?

PRAY

- ✦ Spend some time thanking God for deliverance you have experienced.
- ✦ Pray for others who seek the deliverance of God in their lives: the sick, the poor, the addicted, and the dying.
- ✦ If you are enslaved in some way, ask God to rescue you.

God of freedom, you continue to bring us out of oppression. We pray that those who would still enslave us would let us go, so that they too will be free. Enable us to experience your liberating grace in our daily lives. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.



DAY 2, TUESDAY

The LORD said, “. . . I have come down to deliver [the people] from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Exodus 3:7, 8

PAUSE AND REFLECT

The God of the ten commandments is one who gives gifts. We often think of commandments or rules as burdens that restrict us. The ten commandments, however, come from a God who gives gifts.

These commandments are gift.

Israel came to understand that the whole of life was gift. To believe in this God was to see life as gift. The world, daily bread, my property, myself, and my whole life is gift. All of creation takes on a different meaning when acknowledged as gift. My mother and father, my spouse, my children, siblings, neighbours, and possessions take on a different character when seen as gift. Even my enemies take on a new character when I dare to pronounce them as gift.

Think of all of your own past as gift. Consider the people and the things that surround your present life as gift. Consider this: The God who gives gifts will be present in the future, so you really have nothing to fear.

Are we who are part of God's covenant with the Israelites also on a pilgrimage to a land flowing with milk and honey? Will we be embraced by these gifts throughout our lives?

What does it mean that all people do not receive the same gifts? When it comes to the basics needed for life, how does that call us to work for redistribution and justice?

It's sometimes hard to see life as gift in times of adversity—illness, death, pandemic, job loss, the end of a relationship, and so on. How can we look for gifts from God in difficult times?

PRAY

- ✦ Give thanks for people, possessions, and the world of nature that God has given to us as gift.
- ✦ Invite God to help you to see yourself as gift and to see your purpose for being placed on the earth.
- ✦ Thank God for the ten commandments.

Liberating God, you continue to give us life and to gift us with good things. Help us to see and to embrace your gifts and your goodness in our daily lives, even in hard times. Open us to receive and appreciate the gift of the ten commandments. In your life-giving name we pray. Amen.



DAY 32, THURSDAY

Introduction

Our Father in heaven.

WHAT IS THIS? or WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

*With these words God wants to attract us,
so that we come to believe he is truly our Father
and we are truly his children,
in order that we may ask him boldly
and with complete confidence,
just as loving children ask their loving father. (SC)*

PAUSE AND REFLECT

“Our Father.” How far does *our* go for you? Does it only include your family? Does it include your church? Does it extend to the neighbourhood, to the city, or even to the nation? Does it include all people in the nation, or just the Lutherans, just the Christians, just a certain political party, just a certain group with common values? Does it extend to other nations, to other races and cultures, to people of differing economic status, sexual orientation, or gender? Does it include those who upheld apartheid in South Africa, conspiracy theorists, hard-core racists, gang members, drug dealers? Keep in mind that God is always trying to expand the inclusiveness of our prayers.

Abba (which means “Father” in Aramaic) is an intimate, familiar term. Jesus invites us to remember the God of intimacy and to use this term when we pray. Can God be that close and intimate?

Listen to God speak in Isaiah:

Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.”
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Isaiah 49:14-15

Or listen to the psalmist:

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.
Psalm 103:13-14

Listen also to the word of God from Deuteronomy 32:11-12a:

As an eagle stirs up its nest,
and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,
and bears them aloft on its pinions,
the LORD alone guided [his people].

As Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he reminds them of the caring and intimacy that God extends to them and to you. Think of endearing words that you use with someone who is your beloved—a spouse, parent, child, or dear friend. If possible use these words as you talk to God.

PRAY

- Pray for those who prepare for baptism.
- Pray for those who do not know God or whose only prayer is a cry for help.
- Imagine you are a young eagle in the nest and your mother is watching over you. What do you have to say to her? Can you say the same things to God?

Abba, you are love divine, and you call us into a relationship of intimacy. Yet it is hard for us to feel close to one who is so holy and majestic. Open our hearts to receive and experience your deep love for us and to relax into your strong, loving arms. Help us to love you in return with total trust and openness. Remind us that your love extends to all your creation, even those we want to label as “other.” Amen.



DAY 78, MONDAY

By Baptism we are all equally members of the Body. Where else in this world but in the Eucharist are king and beggar given the same gifts?¹¹

PAUSE AND REFLECT

There is a miracle happening at the eucharistic table. God sees all in the same way. All genders, all ages are the same. All states of health, all kinds of ability, all races, all occupations, all sexualities—everyone!—all receive the same gifts at the table.

Like the children of Israel as they received the gift of manna in the wilderness—each day there was only enough for each household, and a little to spare for the neighbour and the stranger.

Like the miracle of the five loaves and two fish Jesus blessed and gave to the crowd—all who were present received and were nourished.

Like God's vision of the end of the world—all will be gathered at one banquet table to eat and be nourished.

The eucharist is the place where this dream, this hope, this reality of God is kept alive on the earth.

How can you affirm this vision in your life? Does the eucharist have something to say about shelter, food, clothing, water, and how everyone might receive what they need? Does the eucharist have something to say about wages, working conditions, health care, treatment before the law, education, and all other things that are part of the stuff of life?

PRAY

- ✦ Give thanks for the vision that is kept alive in the eucharist.
- ✦ Ask God to show you how this vision can be carried into your daily life.
- ✦ Take out your life card and think of the people in your life. Remember that God looks at them with love and compassion.

HOLY COMMUNION

Bountiful God, teach us to be satisfied with enough. As we come to your holy table and all receive the same portion and gift from your precious body and blood, inspire us to think about the ways that all things of life are distributed. Help us to generously share from the bounty that we have received, according to our true ability. Give us courage to work to change unfair practices that do not equitably distribute the basic things of life. In response to your generous heart, we pray. Amen.

