

# The Jesus Prayer

# The Jesus Prayer

THE ANCIENT DESERT PRAYER  
THAT TUNES THE HEART TO GOD



Frederica Mathewes-Green



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*With love to all our grandchildren:*  
David Benjamin, Hannah, Isaac, Adam, Fintan,  
Eudora, Michael, Emmeline, Ruth, Lucas,  
and anyone else still to come

“May you see your children’s children!” (Psalm 128:6)

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## Introduction

**I**t was about 2:30 in the morning when I got out of bed last night to pray. I have been doing this since I was pregnant with my first baby, decades ago; I had read somewhere that the middle of the night was a good time to have your daily prayers, with silence before and silence afterward, and no phones to ring. I thought it sounded like a good habit to establish, since I'd be getting up with the baby anyway.

Over the years there were three babies, and eventually three teenagers, and now three young-marrieds with babies of their own. Now the household is down to my husband and me again. All these years I've been getting up in the night to pray. It's a necessity now, and I need it like I need food and light.

About fifteen years ago I started to use the Jesus Prayer during these mid-night hours: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." This very simple prayer was developed in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine during the early centuries of Christian faith, and has been practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Church ever since. It is a prayer inspired by St. Paul's exhortation to "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17), and its purpose is to tune one's inner attention to the presence of the Lord.

But what is that nameless thing, the "inner attention"? When we talk about feeling God's presence, we're accustomed to speak as if such experiences arose from our

emotions. Yet when I had my rather dramatic conversion experience, decades ago, it sure seemed more objective than that. At the time, the best way I could describe it was to say that “a little radio switched on inside me,” and I became aware of Christ speaking to me. (It wasn’t something I heard with my ears, but by an inner voice, filling my awareness.)

I never knew what to make of that “little radio”; it didn’t fit our familiar division of people into “head” and “heart.” But as I began to read the literature of Eastern Christianity, I found that they were familiar with this “little radio.” They even had a word for it: the *nous*. It’s a word that recurs through the Greek New Testament, but we don’t have a good equivalent in English. It gets translated “mind,” but it doesn’t mean the talkative mind, the one that cogitates and constructs theories. It is a receptive capacity of the intellect; we could call it “the understanding” or “the comprehension.” The Eastern Church has always known that the *nous* can be trained to register, or perceive, the voice of God.

That is where the Jesus Prayer comes in. The idea is to spend some time every day practicing the Prayer. You pray it fifty or a hundred times, or more, or less; not robotically but sincerely, speaking to Christ while pulling together your attention to the best of your ability. You get the Prayer going other times, too, whenever you think of it, while waiting at a stoplight or brushing your teeth. This brief, all-purpose, very portable prayer takes root and spreads.

In the process, you hone your ability to discern God’s presence. He is already there, of course; we just aren’t very good at perceiving it. Practicing the Jesus Prayer helps you sharpen your ability to “tune in” to his presence, just as

you would practice scales to hone your ability to identify musical pitch.

So last night I awoke, as usual, without an alarm—sometime in the middle of the night I just swim up to consciousness. I went out into the hallway and stood on the worn spot in the carpet, in front of the bookcase, and looked up at the icon of Christ. A blue light was slanting in the window from my study, filtering between the large, heart-shaped leaves of the catalpa tree. Our street, a simple curve on a hilltop, was still. Sometimes, if I wake up later, I hear an early-rising robin robustly anticipating the dawn (and probably annoying all the other birds, who are still trying to get some shut-eye), but last night it was too early even for him.

I looked into the face of Christ, illuminated softly now by candlelight. I made the sign of the cross. I said some preliminary prayers, including the Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed, and recited Psalm 51, the prayer that David offered when he repented for seducing Bathsheba and murdering her husband. I've heard that you should "warm up your heart" before beginning the Jesus Prayer, and these preliminaries help do that; the Creed reminds me of the majesty of God, while Psalm 51 reminds me of my neediness, my damaged, greedy condition.

After that, I began repeating the Jesus Prayer in my mind, over and over, in an unhurried way: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." (The words can be varied a bit; I use a shorter version, while the standard form is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." My husband uses an even longer version, praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son

of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” the last phrase an echo of the tax collector’s prayer in Jesus’ parable.) I aim to say this prayer a hundred times, and keep track by moving my fingers along a prayer rope, a loop of silken cord tied with a hundred elaborate knots. When my mind wanders—which it does, believe me, over and over every night—I back up a few knots and focus in again.

This practice of saying the Jesus Prayer is accurately termed a spiritual discipline; it’s a disciplined learning process, like learning to play the cello. It takes perseverance and focused attention. For a cellist, the tedium of practicing scales must appear so distant from the final goal, when that beautiful, dark music will spill forth fluidly. Yet, one day, the cellist will pick up her bow, and she and the instrument will have become one.

So I keep on asking Christ for mercy, working the Prayer deep into my awareness. I say it a hundred times at night, and throughout the day I set it going in my mind as often as I remember (hopefully, at least once an hour). But it is the focused mid-night prayer time that really enables it to root down deep.

And gradually I am coming to see that it is true. It really is possible to sense the presence of God—continuously.

I hasten to add that I *don’t* sense it continuously. To be completely honest, I don’t want to. I’d rather slide away into thinking about things that attract me, or anger me, or frighten me, and behave as if I can deal with them on my own. Apparently I think I can pull down a window shade between God and me, and do things the way I want to without him finding out.

That's ridiculous, of course; if I turned my back on him and ran away as fast as I could, wherever I stopped he would have beaten me there. "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!" (Ps. 139:7–8).

But he is loving and very patient, and when I'm ready to turn and look at him again, I find that he has been continuing all that time to hold me in his steady gaze. Then the Prayer rises up inside, and makes a connection like a lamp plugging into a socket.

This prayer is not designed to generate fancy mystical experiences or soppy emotions. Yet it works away steadily inside, gradually building a sure connection with the Lord. Where the Lord enters in, there is light; I can see many ways that he has changed me over the years, illuminating and dispelling reflexive lying thoughts and fears. My part was just to keep showing up, day after day, for these quiet sessions with him.

The Prayer's goal is to help you keep always in touch with the presence of God. Some of you are already saying, "This is for me. This is what I've always wanted." You know what I mean by "the presence of God," because you've felt it yourself. And whether it was on one or two memorable occasions, or regularly over the years, you agree that it is intoxicating. When I try to describe it, I find I use the word *beauty* more often than any other. You know what I'm talking about, and you're eager to hear more.

But some of you feel sad when you hear people talk of such experiences. You've never felt anything you would

describe as “the presence of God.” You wonder why you’ve been left out. Has God rejected you?

The first thing I want to tell you is this: the very fact that you want to know God’s presence means you’re already sensing *something*. Think about it. How many people never give God a second thought? How many people sleep in on Sunday morning, and never open a Bible or send up a prayer? But you’re not like that; you really want to be closer to the Lord. My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God’s presence, or you wouldn’t care.

Here’s a homely analogy: picture yourself walking around a shopping mall, looking at the people and the window displays. Suddenly, you get a whiff of cinnamon. You weren’t even hungry, but now you really crave a cinnamon roll. This craving isn’t something you made up. There you were, minding your own business, when some drifting molecules of sugar, butter, and spice collided with a susceptible patch inside your nose. You had a real encounter with cinnamon—not a mental delusion, not an emotional projection, but the real thing.

And what was the effect? You want more, *now*. And if you hunger to know the presence of God, it’s because, I believe, you have already begun to scent its compelling delight.

So, if you’re one of those people who think that you’ve never had an experience of God, ask yourself: Why do you even care? Why do you spend time praying? Why do you bother to read the Bible, or books about prayer? The world is full of ways to waste your time. But if you picture yourself giving up on prayer, you feel hollow, desolated. All this must be doing *something*, even if you can’t put your finger on it.

The Prayer can help you learn to perceive that something, and do so more consistently and accurately.

About now some of you are thinking, “Well, I certainly have wandered into the wrong room.” You don’t recognize yourself here at all. You’re not much for churchgoing. You’re not even sure you would call yourself a Christian. But you do want to grow spiritually, and you want to know God better. Is it all right for you to use the Prayer too?

As we’ll see, in the Christian East, homeland of the Jesus Prayer, there is some opinion that it can be harmful to practice the Jesus Prayer if you are not fully engaged in the life of the Orthodox Church, receiving the sacraments and guided by a wise spiritual elder. So, if some think it’s unwise even for non-Orthodox Christians to take up the Prayer, then it would certainly be too risky for a non-Christian to attempt it.

I don’t expect those concerns will dissuade such readers who still want to try it, however. So I’ll just give a word of advice. The spiritual realm is real, I have found, and not all the forces in it are benign. The less benign powers are associated, in particular, with lying (Jn. 8:44). This is a context, then, in which it is not wise to practice insincerity or hypocrisy. Perhaps you admire Jesus of Nazareth as an important historical figure and an eloquent teacher—but the Prayer commits you to more than that. The first word of the Prayer is *Lord*, a statement that you acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as your Lord. Then you call him “Christ,” from the Greek word meaning “Anointed One,” or, in Hebrew, “the Messiah.”

Those are some significant assertions, and if you don’t agree with them, ask yourself why you *want* to pray the Prayer. You may feel that, for reasons you can’t identify, it

just seems to be calling to you. That is an interesting thing—in fact, it is a good thing. If you respond to that call with an open mind, you may reap something from the Prayer that you never expected.

There's one motivation for taking up the Prayer that I would discourage, though. Somehow in our day, the concept of "spirituality" has gotten unhitched from actual communion with God—and the fear and trembling authentic contact evokes—and come to be regarded almost as a hobby. Folks who seek spirituality rather than God can give off whiffs of superiority, as if they think they're more elevated than ordinary folks.

Once when I was speaking about the Prayer, a man in the audience commented, "Somehow this seems different from what I usually hear about spirituality. I think the main thing is that it doesn't have that element of narcissism."

The spiritual path of the Jesus Prayer is not one that lends itself to narcissism. The effect of the Prayer is to knock you down in your own mind. Then you discover that it is safe to be knocked down, safe to be humble, because God's love is everywhere, filling the world with his light and life. The Prayer will make you into a child. "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mk. 10:15). When defensiveness falls away and humility flows in, you become able to love others with the love that God has for them, and even "count others better than yourselves," as St. Paul urged the Philippians (Phil. 2:3).

I am hardly an expert on the Jesus Prayer, but I'd like to help you understand it at least as far as I do. Too many of us spend our days feeling that God is far away, occupied with

more important things. But Jesus told us that isn't true; God is so familiar with our bodies that "even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Mt. 10:30); he is so familiar with our thoughts that he "knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt. 6:8). I hope that through the Jesus Prayer you, too, may learn how to tune that "little radio" to the voice of God, and discover the joy of his infinitely loving presence.

# Part One



# Chapter One

## HISTORY, SCRIPTURE, AND THE MEANING OF MERCY



**T**he Jesus Prayer arose in the early church as a way to practice continuous prayer. When I decided to start using it in my own life, I remembered that St. Paul had said something about “pray constantly,” and went to look up that passage.

I was surprised to find that he had expressed the thought in four different places:

“Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” (Rom. 12:12)

“Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance.” (Eph. 6:18)

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” (Col. 4:2)

“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances.” (1 Thess. 5:16–18)

He must have thought this message was important, because he said it to four different communities—the Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. It must

have been one of the points he emphasized regularly. And he must have thought it was *possible*. He wouldn't have kept on telling these early believers to "pray constantly" if they were humanly incapable of doing so.

It's not easy to do, though, is it? Many devout Christians have taken a stab at trying to pray constantly, but give up in frustration before long. In my case, I was always discovering that somewhere along the line I had simply stopped praying. When I did persevere, I ran out of things to say. If I tried filling the time by just repeating, "Thank you, Lord," and such, it soon felt hollow. I worried that I was even ruining my ability to pray sincerely, numbing myself by repeating prayers without paying attention.

And, frankly, I just didn't understand how it was supposed to work. How can you be thinking prayers all the time, when you have to think about other things too?

Earlier generations of Christians figured all this out. In the third century, prayerful men and women began to go into the deserts of Egypt and Palestine in order to devote themselves unceasingly to communion with God. (They are known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and have the title "Abba" and "Amma.") The desert appealed to them because it eliminated most of those other things to think about, and life was stripped down to the essentials. Extreme deprivation taught self-mastery, and was itself a physical form of prayer.

In the desert, these spiritual athletes experimented with different forms of constant prayer. They recognized that the task was to discipline the wandering mind and focus it on something spiritually healthful, so they memorized the

Scriptures (the Psalms, in particular) and quietly murmured the verses to themselves throughout the day.

Great depths could be found in a single line. Abba Pambo (AD 303–75) could not read, so he asked another desert dweller to teach him a psalm. When he heard the first words of Psalm 39, “I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue,” he asked the other monk to stop and then meditated on that verse alone—for nineteen years. (Asked whether he was ready to hear at least the remainder of the verse, he replied that he had not mastered the first part yet.) Evagrius of Pontus (AD 345–99), on the other hand, listed 487 Scriptures, each of which was to be memorized and brought forth when needed to combat a specific temptation. St. John Cassian (AD 360–435) recommended the first verse of Psalm 70 as the best all-purpose Scripture for those seeking continual prayer: “Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!”

With time, the form “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” emerged as the universal favorite. It echoes the many times people asked Jesus for mercy during the years of his earthly ministry:

“A Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.’”  
(Mt. 15:22)

The ten lepers “lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’” (Lk. 17:11–19)

“Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (Mk. 10:46–48)

“A man came up to him and kneeling before him said, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly.’” (Mt. 17:14–15)

But what does it mean to ask for mercy? Some people feel uncomfortable with that plea, since asking for mercy over and over could sound like doubting God’s forgiveness. Why do we have to keep begging, like a prisoner begging a judge to be lenient?

Take another look at these Scriptures. None are requests for leniency; all are cries for help. The pleas come from people who know that they are needy. Each one appeals to Jesus’ compassion, his pity. The need may be for release from an illness, or release from the tyranny of sin. (We could add the tax collector in Jesus’ parable, who “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’” Lk. 18:13.) In some way we don’t immediately understand, healing and forgiveness are linked.

The roots of the Jesus Prayer go back to the early centuries of Eastern Christianity, and we can get a better understanding of what the Prayer means by examining how it works in that

native context, and seeing how the Orthodox Church views sin and forgiveness. I am writing this book during Orthodox Holy Week, and just last night attended the service of Holy Unction, in which we consecrated the oil that will be used in anointing for healing during the coming year. In the course of this service we heard seven Epistle and seven Gospel readings, each presenting examples of miraculous healing; we also offered many prayers emphasizing God's compassion. After that, the Gospel Book was held open over the heads of the worshipers, who came forward to be anointed with the newly blessed oil.

Throughout the evening, the theme of healing was interwoven with assurance of forgiveness; we were often reminded that those who are anointed have been forgiven their sins as well. In a mystery, the two go together; God's compassion to heal is his compassion to forgive. We see an example of this in practice, when Jesus says first to the paralytic lowered through the roof, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mt. 9:2), healing his soul in advance of healing his body.

The Eastern Christian tradition lays great stress on God's willing forgiveness. Like the father of the prodigal son, he longs for the sinner's return: "While [the son] was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20). God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Jesus said that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10), and "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk. 2:17). God spoke these words through the prophet Ezekiel: "As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the

wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die?” (Ezek. 33:11). Orthodox prayers regularly call God “all-compassionate,” “all-merciful,” and state, “you alone love mankind.” God’s love is the only love in the universe worthy of the name. God *is* love, and his forgiveness can be nothing but abundant and free.

So this isn’t a question about whether we’re forgiven. No, the problem lies elsewhere; the problem is *we keep on sinning*. Sin is in us like an infection in the blood. It keeps us choosing to do and say and think things that damage Creation and hurt other people—and the ill effects rebound on us as well. There can even be *sin* without *guilt*. Sometimes we add to the weary world’s burden of sin through something we did in ignorance or unintentionally, for example, by saying something that hurt a hearer for reasons we knew nothing about. Our words increased the sin-sickness in the world, yet we are not guilty for that unintentional sin (though we are still sorry for inadvertently causing pain). Sin can be recognized as a noxious force on earth without having to pin the guilt on someone every time.

In the Eastern view, all humans share a common life; when Christ became a member of the human race, our restoration was begun. The opposite is, sadly, true as well; our continuing sins infect and damage everybody else, and indeed Creation itself. It’s like air pollution. There is suffering for everyone who shares our human life, everyone who breathes, even the innocent who never did anyone harm.

The devil is implicated in this pattern. This is a premodern church, and Orthodox Christians retain a practical belief in

the devil, one rooted in long experience. The evil one is a tempter, rather than a figure from a horror movie; his goal is to destroy our faith and drag us from salvation. And he loves suffering, especially when it is inflicted on the innocent. That's two-for-one, in his book; he gets to savor not only the tears and agony of the innocent, but also the distress of us not-so-innocent folks who look on helplessly. If he handles things just right, and suggests the right desolating thought at the optimal moment, he might even undermine an onlooker's faith in God.

In the Christian East there is an answer to the problem of evil: "An enemy has done this" (Mt. 13:28). And our own petty sins contribute to his strength.

So we ask for mercy because we are sick with sin, and will go on sinning. Even though we are as confident as beloved children in our Father's compassion, we grieve because we contribute more to the planet's suffering every day. The tragedies in each morning's news were assisted in some small way by yesterday's stupid, selfish, fearful choices. We are helplessly entangled in sin and suffering, and only Jesus' touch will heal us. We cry out with the blind, lame, and paralyzed of his day: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us!

God doesn't need us to remind him to be merciful; he is merciful all the time, even when we don't ask. But unless we make a habit of asking for mercy, we forget that we *need* it. Ego builds a cardboard fortress that humility must, every day, tear down. "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). We are pitiable, and God pities us.

With God's merciful help, we begin to heal. Progress is not very discernible in the midst of the fray, but over time it becomes clear that we are indeed fighting off the infection and gradually getting stronger, less fretful, more loving. With the Jesus Prayer, we begin to get some breathing room. We start to be able to recognize the subtle thoughts that lead toward temptation, before it is too late and they overwhelm us. We see and resist them, and every such victory increases our strength to resist next time.

Of course, sometimes we see those temptations and fall anyway. But even failures can work for our good. They induce genuine humility; they help us learn the devil's strategies; and they teach firsthand compassion for fellow sinners.

This process of healing takes a long time. Even as we see reasons for hope, we simultaneously gain better understanding of how far down the roots of sin can go. It would be devastating to see the whole truth about ourselves all at once. Our compassionate Lord brings us along gently, allowing some blissful ignorance. Each layer of the onion is shed at the right time; we encounter the next truth about ourselves when and how we can bear it, as our loving Lord knows best. "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn. 16:12).

You can see why, if there was only one prayer you were going to continually offer, one that asked Jesus for mercy would be ideal. The Prayer trains you to adopt the stance of asking for mercy, because that is the posture from which you can best see his face. It's like trying to see a star out your window on a summer night. The leaves of the trees and the

neighbors' roofs block your view, but if you lean over just right and crane your neck, you can see it. The Jesus Prayer teaches you how to "lean just right," combining joy, trust, penitence, and gratitude, so you can find yourself in his presence.

Till now we've been talking about learning to sense God's presence, but his plan for us goes even further than that. We don't merely encounter Christ or imitate him, we don't merely become *like* Christ; we actually become one with him, saturated body and soul with his life. It will be for us as it was for St. Paul: "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21), and, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Have we gotten used to taking such words as pious metaphor? In the Jesus Prayer tradition, they're simple Bible truth. The whole point of salvation is restored union with God. Christ came to rescue us from our bondage to sin and the devil ("The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil," 1 Jn. 3:8), and we are now free to grow in union with him.

What could "union with God" mean, in practice? It meant something different to me at one time than it does now. Before my family and I joined the Eastern Orthodox Church, in 1993, we were members of a mainline liturgical church. I liked learning about the historic faith (I'd gotten a seminary degree alongside my husband, a pastor) and did a good bit of reading in classic Western Christian spirituality. From the perspective I gained there, I associated talk about union with God with images of the mystic saints, floating above the ground and dizzy with ecstatic visions. That was

the sort of stuff you left to professionals—the “don’t try this at home” category of spirituality.

So it was surprising to find that, in the Eastern Christian tradition, union with God is the goal for everyone. It is God’s will for every Christian, and, through their preaching of the gospel, for every human being. The purpose of this earthly life is to be saturated with the life of Christ. Everything flows from that, every work of art and act of courageous witness, every theological insight and every effort to help the poor. The idea is that God will fill people with his Son’s life, and then they will accomplish his work in the world. It works better that way, actually. The other way round, when people set out to do things *for* God under their own steam, leads to disappointment, conflict, and wasted effort.

This process of assimilating the presence of God is called *theosis* (pronounced “THEH-o-sees”). *Theos* means “God,” and as a cloth soaks up water by osmosis, we are saturated with God through theosis. This indwelling presence heals, restores, and completes us, preparing each of us to take up the role in his kingdom that we alone can fill.

Progress in theosis is a gift of God, not won by any effort, of course. But you can make yourself available to such a blessing by practicing spiritual disciplines, such as observing the fast days in the church’s calendar (in the Orthodox Church, this means keeping a vegan diet) and saying the Jesus Prayer. Such resources are like the workout machines in a health club, the ones every serious athlete will use. People who are making progress share some common characteristics, too: good self-control when it comes to the appetites, absence of anger, ample humility, kindness, and diligence

in prayer. But some folks have a more sober quality, while others are full of joy; there isn't any one personality type. If anything, the indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he was ever able to be before.

I've noticed that men are particularly drawn to Eastern Christian spirituality. Men, I think, are starving for a form of Christianity that will ask something of them. They're hungry for a challenge—a *clear, straightforward* challenge, that is. I did an informal survey not long ago, asking male converts what had attracted them to Orthodoxy. I was surprised at how many men voiced gratitude, not just for the rigor of Eastern spirituality (*challenge* was, in fact, the most-used term), but also for the fact that expectations are set forth clearly, with no secret meanings that they have to figure out. Men are glad to do hard things, as long as they have a clear idea of what they're supposed to do. (In this gratitude for clarity I heard an echo of all the frustrated husbands who have said to their wives: "I'm not a mind reader—just tell me what you want!")

When this concept of theosis is unfamiliar, it is hard for a reader to make any sense of it; it may even sound alarming or kooky, or like empty, well-meaning piety. Once I had given a talk about the Jesus Prayer at a college, and as I left the podium a student was waiting to ask a question, ready to jot down my answer. He asked, "Are there any case histories?" I was perplexed by the question, so he tried again: "Has anyone ever tried to do this?"

I didn't say, "Well, *I'm* trying to do it." Instead, I suggested a couple of names he could look up on the Internet (St. Seraphim and Motovilov, in case you want to look them

up, too). But the moment impressed me with how hard it must be to grasp what I'm talking about from an isolated lecture or a book.

The Jesus Prayer isn't designed to be learned that way. Historically, it has been passed on face-to-face, from one Christ-loving person to the next, down the generations from the time of the Desert saints. It is learned in a community of fellow believers, all of whom are aware of their need and sin, trying daily to resist temptation better and love God more. It should be individually coached or tutored by a spiritual mother or father who knows you through and through, who loves you, holds you accountable, and is able wisely to adapt the classic teaching to your unique struggles. In short, the Jesus Prayer is meant to be learned in the midst of a living community, where you can see numerous examples of what it looks like when ordinary people are doing it and encouraging each other. When you can see real folks doing it, it is a lot easier to grasp, and seems a lot more possible.

Theosis is a vast and daunting goal even to imagine, so there's something distinctively, sweetly Christian about using a prayer that is so simple. There have been plenty of other religions that taught convoluted mystical procedures for union with God, but for Christians it is as straightforward as calling on our Lord and asking him for mercy. As you form the habit of saying this prayer in the back of your mind all the time, it soaks into you, like dye into cotton, and colors the way you encounter every person and circumstance you meet.

There's the answer to the practical question I had a while back: how can you think about the words of the Prayer all

the time, when there are so many other things you have to think about? In the same way that you can have a meal, go on a trip, or visit a museum with a friend. You could do all of those things alone, but if you take a friend with you, it won't hinder your enjoyment. You may get even more out of it, because your friend's presence enhances your awareness, and you see things through his eyes as well. When you see everything alongside that best of friends, Jesus Christ, your encounters with the world and everyone and everything in it are transformed.

# Chapter Two

## TERMS, CONCEPTS, AND CONTEXT



The Jesus Prayer has been treasured in the Christian East ever since its birth in the desert, more than 1,500 years ago. There have been periods when the Prayer was very popular, and other times when it was not much practiced; at some points, it seemed as if only a few monks on Mt. Athos, the renowned center of Orthodox spirituality in northern Greece, were keeping the practice alive. (Orthodox men's and women's monasteries are still a good place to find the Prayer's most diligent practitioners.) But because the Prayer is so simple, it's accessible to anyone, lay or ordained, educated or illiterate. Over the centuries, uncountable numbers of believers have come to know God's constant nearness by practicing this fluid, continual remembrance of Jesus' name.

In the eighteenth century, two monks gathered historic writings on prayer and monastic life, ranging from the fourth to the fourteenth century, into an anthology called the *Philokalia* (that's Greek for "love of the beautiful"). Other works on the Prayer have been written in the centuries since, the best known being an anonymous memoir called *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which appeared in Russia in the nineteenth century. When a translation of that work was published in Europe in 1925, it gave Western Christians their first encounter with the Prayer as a living practice. (A

character in J.D. Salinger's 1961 book *Franny and Zooey* is shown reading *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which further made it known.)

If you read classic works about the Jesus Prayer (I make some suggestions at the back of the book), you'll encounter some new terms. Sometimes the phrase "prayer of the heart" is used interchangeably with "the Jesus Prayer." They don't mean exactly the same thing, however. "The Jesus Prayer" refers to the specific words of the Prayer, and the Prayer as a prayer discipline and historic entity. "Prayer of the heart" refers to the *action* of the Prayer, something that may occur, by God's grace, within a person who diligently practices the Prayer.

At first the Prayer is just a string of words repeated, perhaps mechanically, in your mind. But with time it may "descend into the heart," and those who experience this will be attentive to maintain it, continually "bringing the mind" (the nous, that is) "into the heart." We'll explore the terms *mind* and *heart* in the next chapter, but for now, keep in mind that these don't correspond to "reason" and "emotion"; both terms have different definitions in the Christian East.

But this "descent into the heart" does include reference to the physical heart (or the general region of the heart within the chest). This blending of matter and spirit can be surprising to Western Christians, but it came naturally to the earliest Christians, who inherited from ancient Judaism an expectation that God is present throughout Creation. "Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD" (Jer. 23:24).

"Prayer of the heart" occurs when the Prayer moves from merely mental repetition, forced along by your own effort,

to an effortless and spontaneous self-repetition of the Prayer that emanates from the core of your being, your heart. You discover that the Holy Spirit has been there, praying, all along. Then heart and soul, body and mind, memory and will, the very breath of life itself, everything that you have and are unites in gratitude and joy, tuned like a violin string to the name of Jesus.

This “descent” is a gift of the Holy Spirit, not something you can force. So you may say that you are practicing the Jesus Prayer, but it would sound boastful to say that you are practicing prayer of the heart.

Another term you’ll hear is *hesychia* (pronounced “heh-see-KEE-ah”). In biblical Greek this word means “silence,” “quiet,” “stillness,” or “rest.” It is not an empty silence, but one marked by respect and awe. I think of Job, who said, when confronted by God’s majesty and power, “I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4). A holy person who has progressed far in acquiring this inner stillness may be called a “*hesychast* elder.” *Hesychast* silence makes room for profound, attentive listening. With time, the Prayer quiets and unifies the scattered, wandering nous, so that it can focus on God’s presence in simplicity, with love.

As I begin defining terms associated with the Jesus Prayer, I am faced again with how much more there is to explain. There are some basic differences between Eastern and Western Christianity. It probably sounds absurd even to speak of Western Christianity as a single entity, if you picture the vast diversity of faith expressions that grew up in Europe and America. But from the Eastern perspective, these Western versions of Christianity all have a strong

family resemblance. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes in his classic book, *The Orthodox Church*, “In the west it is usual to think of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as opposite extremes; but to an Orthodox they appear as two sides of the same coin.”

It shouldn't be surprising, really, that the two great geographic realms of Christendom would develop different characteristics. They lived different histories; they grappled with different controversies, fought different wars, asked different questions, produced different art, and developed different forms of government and very different cultures.

What's more, they read different versions of the Scriptures. The East continued to use the Greek text (including the Greek Old Testament produced by Jewish scholars about 250 BC; that's the version St. Paul quotes from). But the West adopted a Latin translation of Old and New Testaments in about AD 400. A language shapes a worldview; every language maps the world in its own way.

In composing this chapter, I've found it frustrating to try to make a thumbnail sketch of Orthodox Christianity; it's hard even to know where to *start*. If I choose one element, another starts waving its hand in the air and saying it needs to go first. The Jesus Prayer is the most intimate and powerful prayer discipline of Eastern faith, and I was reluctant to write about it at all; for several years I kept declining the invitation. (I'll tell you what changed my mind later on.) But let's take a few pages to try to note some of the characteristics of Eastern Christianity.

Perhaps the first, and most telling, point to make is that *spirituality* is not a word used much in Orthodox contexts