

Excerpt from
A PRAYERBOOK FOR
HUSBANDS AND WIVES

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FOREWORD

Thanne and I have been married for thirty-two years. Vigorous years. Our marriage has been a story of calm days, common days, days of a sudden and blinding transcendence; we've sinned and confessed and forgiven; there have been trips and children, emergency rooms, schoolrooms, courtrooms, and through it all through the daily round of human duties of faith. Our faith, yes; but more surely than that, the faithfulness of heaven.

God has been the deeper love and the ground of our marriage, always.

But I myself I did not always acknowledge that. Nor did I always take advantage of the sweet communion of prayer.

Thanne has. And it was Thanne who persuaded me to pray out loud with her.

Within days of our wedding, I began studies at Concordia Seminary in preparation for ministry, and Thanne began her profession as a teacher. Those were hard times for her. Often, in visible stress, she would say, "Wally, we should pray together."

I didn't disagree. But neither did I actually agree.

I'm not sure why. Perhaps because, though my father was a pastor, I never experienced spontaneous prayer before. We'd only prayed formal prayers as Thanne and I did at mealtimes now. Well, and I think I was embarrassed by the danger of prayer: revealing myself, you know; inverting the truer truth of myself before Jesus and Thanne together.

But in those days I was an angry young man, angry for causes I couldn't see so neither could I see the anger in me. Thanne did, of course. Thanne suffered my fits of gloom. And sometimes I saw that: her suffering. And when I knew that I had hurt her, I grieved.

"Thanne," I said. "Thanne," I begged her in the heat of my shame, "what can I do to make it up? What can I do to prove I love you?"

One day, when I was in deepest need of her forgiveness, the opportunistic Ruthanne said, "Pray with me, Wally. Pray out loud with me."

I was caught. I could not avoid the issue.

"Okay."

But I was the seminary student. I knew about God. So I took us into the bedroom and said we should lie down on the bed. We did. Side by side.

But I felt breathless. Nervous. "Wait!" I cried. I jumped up and turned off the light. Well, somehow this praying thing seemed as awkward and exposed as the first time we made love together.

"Now, then." I went first.

I gathered my thoughts, cleared my throat, then, in the darkness, began to fashion a formal, literate prayer. Petitions. Bible verses. I surprised myself. My voice grew strong. See Thanne? See? I can do this after all. I succeeded very well in sounding like a preacher in the pulpit.

When I finished there was a silence. Had she fallen asleep?

No, she hadn't.

Quietly Thanne began to pray, with no more force or formality than when she talks softly to me at night. But she was talking to Jesus. It seemed as if I weren't even there. Jesus was close, close, intimate to her. Jesus was all. And I felt a little like a peeping Tom, not so much hearing her prayer as over-hearing it.

I was ashamed. My brazen prayer was only a crashing cymbal next to the common honesty of her language. And I realized that I had, in effect, prayed to her, prayer for her approval, while she was praying to Jesus, for Jesus' blessed response.

And then, still in her tender and sacred conversation, Thanne began to tell the Lord Jesus about "Wally." About me. As if I were so important that Jesus should take care of me. And in that moment, in the darkness, I started to cry.

What a gentle love my wife displayed: first for Jesus, and then for me--but within that divine love her marital love glowed with a holy light, shining Christ on me. We three were woven into a graceful, tough, and sacred whole. I, too: I had entered the intimacy. That's why I was crying.

And all this was done in prayer, through prayer, together, out loud.

Embarrassment became meekness. And the revealing of my truest truths only meant that the whole of me had been invited into the intimacy between my wife and my Lord.

Thanne's lesson has never been lost on me. Prayer is more than the uttering of private words: it's the room we enter together; it is a place where the marriage might dwell awhile, protected, candid, consoled--the whole of the marriage in all of its parts, under the love of Jesus.

W.W.

When our children were young, our son Joseph's illnesses were sometimes accompanied by dangerously high fevers. One evening during family prayer time, Talitha prayed, God, please make Joseph get better. And make his

temperature go down to zero. I've chuckled often over that prayer through the years, but it taught me something very important: that when, in our weakness, we pray for foolish things, the Holy Spirit interprets and intercedes on our behalf.

Throughout our marriage, there sometimes has been difficulty in knowing what to pray or even, in our ignorance, praying for foolish things. But I am always encouraged by what St. Paul had to say about Talitha's prayer: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26, 27, The New Revised Standard Version).

In later years, one of our children suffered a difficult transition through adolescence and early adulthood. During those years, I heaved innumerable supplications into the face of God. I prayed daily for the physical and spiritual life of my child. For years I pleaded with God to restore my child. One day I realized that for some time I don't know how long I had been praying thanksgivingóthanksgiving for God's intervention, thanksgiving for God's flawless fatherhood. I don't know when or how this transition occurred because, as far as I could tell, circumstances had not changed. What I know now is that the Holy Spirit was interpreting my prayers in ways that I didn't know. The Spirit of God was teaching me how to pray, was placing words in my heart and on my tongue that I was incapable of praying. I came to realize later that it was at this time that a change was beginning in my child's heart as well as my own. The Spirit knew what I could not know and directed my prayer.

This is what happens when we pray. God's great wisdom not only teaches us how, but interprets our prayer and shapes it into what it ought to be. Like children who are unable to form words to ask from their parents, we bring our inarticulate petitions to God. Like children who don't understand the fullness of what they need, we pray in faith. Like children, we pray with full confidence that God will hear. God knows both what we are asking and what is good for us. What we pray is not as important as that we pray. In the asking our relationship with God grows. And when we pray with our spouse or for our spouse, our bond with each other is strengthened as well.

RW

How to use this book

This book offers three distinct opportunities for the married couple:

(1) Prayers on many topics (sometimes offering two prayers, one for each spouse; sometimes giving you a line-by-line dialogue; sometimes presenting

one prayer for both of you). Pray these out loud together, whenever the need and the occasion arise. Take time! Sit down. Allow yourselves a devout attitude. Go slowly. Make the expressions and the appeals your own by fitting the prayer to your lives.

The index in the back of this book shows you at a glance how many topics these prayers can cover. If you feel the strong need to pray, but are too confused to know the reason, look in the index.

(2) Litanies for repeated occasions (to be used at the beginning of important moments in the marriage--to be used over and over again). Each of these contains its own instructions--but all of them ask you to find a special place in your home for your prayers, devotions, and litanies together.

(3) Directions and suggestions for an annual private retreat, the two of you alone. We urge all married couples to consider the importance of this retreat. Often it was the sweetening--and sometimes the salvation--of our marriage.

In the prayers you will hear our separate voices, husband and wife distinguished from one another. We've made our prayers both personal and universal. But we suggest that you choose which of you might pray a particular prayer the best; just switch the language, replacing "husband" for "wife," and vice versa.

We've designed the book to last you through many years. Even though you will repeat the prayers over and over, you can make them new by referring to the Bible passages bracketed within them. In the beginning, ignore the citations; but the more you pray a particular prayer, the more you'll want to study those passages to enrich its words and its meaning. If you wish, you can base a series of marital devotions upon these prayers, discussing the Biblical passages together.

There is no necessary sequence to your use of this book. Choose prayers as they apply; pray each litany at its appropriate time.

Nevertheless, we do suggest that you both, independently, read through the whole book before you begin its regular use. Learn early the tools it offers your private worship so that you can make the book your own.

For this reason (and to ease your shared praying) we suggest that you get two copies of the book, one for each of you. You'll want to make notes on your own pages; and you won't have to switch one book back and forth while praying.

NOTE: There are two diary-like notebooks we ask each of you to keep: one for personal thanksgivings (see the litany for Suppertime), and one to list the things you give to God (see the litany for the Sabbath). These books will increase your constant attention to Holy God, and they serve you well during the annual retreat.

The litanies are meant to act as milestones throughout the journey of your

married life, shaping your time, devoting it unto the Lord. The "Thanks at Suppertime" litany can be used daily; the "For the Sabbath" litany weekly; the "Before Bible study or devotions together" litany as regularly as you two determine; the "On an Anniversary" litany ... well, of course.

As we said, we hope that our book becomes your book; that you establish certain prayerful patterns with us in order to fill those patterns with your words, your topics, your needs, your souls.

Therefore, each of the litanies also leads you to language of your own, invites you to discover practices special unto the two of you. As you grow confident in these brief moments of worship, introduce gestures and prayerful exchanges which carry the meaning of your own faithful experience.

This collection of prayers is not intended to fulfill all of your prayer needs, nor does it presume to be a substitute for your more personal spontaneous prayer. Because this book by its nature focuses on your relationship with each other, it does not address the many other facets of your lives as parents or friends or members of a community. It is our hope, however, that it will become a tool for establishing and maintaining a healthy prayer life, strengthening the bond not only between the two of you, but also, together, between the two of you and God.

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