

The Jesus Prayer



A Brief Introduction

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**God walks in the soul,
and the soul emigrates to God.**

**Origen of Alexandria
(185-254 CE)**

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What is the Jesus Prayer?

The Jesus Prayer is an experience of God's presence. It has no other purpose. It is not a devotional tool to achieve a desired result. At the same time, it complements other forms of personal and corporate prayer by providing a context for all other forms of prayer. This was true in the daily life of Jesus. His words, his compassionate involvement in the lives of other people, and his faithful commitment to the scriptures and liturgies of his Jewish faith community flowed from his intimacy with God, his Abba.

A simple prayer

The most common form of the Jesus Prayer is *Lord, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner*. Yet there are no rules about its use or words. Some persons omit the words "*a sinner*" because they prefer a less penitential emphasis. Although the Jesus Prayer is not primarily a plea for forgiveness, it acknowledges that sin alienates a person's life from God and that we must rely on God's mercy to restore that relationship. In this context, mercy is Jesus' compassionate desire to remain close to us and renew our life with God and each other.

Others substitute or alternate "*us*" for "*me*" to make the prayer more inclusive. It is possible to say only "*Lord, Jesus Christ*" or even just "*Jesus*." In one of the earliest versions, St. Macarius the Great of Egypt

advises: “*Lord Jesus, have mercy on me; I bless you, Lord Jesus.*” The only essential word is “*Jesus*” because the primary focus of the prayer is the power of the *name* of Jesus. To recite the name of Jesus is to invoke the presence and power of Jesus whose Hebrew name means *God with us*. A further explanation of this reality follows in the next section.

The uses of the Jesus Prayer

There are no rules about the use of the Jesus Prayer. It may be recited any time of day or constantly during the day. Some people prefer to recite the prayer in a quiet place where solitude and silence are possible. But the prayer may also be recited while walking, in a park, at work, while working at a task, or waiting in a line. In all cases the essence of the prayer takes place *within* each person in response to Jesus’ exhortation to “go into your inner chamber...and pray to your Father.” (Mt 6:6) This means that the Jesus Prayer may be used by every person.

Greek Orthodox Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia in England, points out that the traditional use of the Jesus Prayer has two basic forms.¹ The first is the “free use” where the prayer may be recited at any time, place or during any activity. The second is the “formal” use. This is a pattern where the Jesus prayer is invoked during specific times of prayer in a person’s day as well as

¹ Ware, *The Power of the Name*, 5-7

during corporate worship liturgies. Other persons, although a minority, recite the prayer continuously throughout the day, silently or aloud.

Archimandrite Kallistos points out that the Jesus Prayer is imageless prayer. He urges us to avoid focusing on any images of what we think God may be like or any theological descriptions of God. The words of the prayer are short and simple so that they lead us into a silent presence of the Holy One.²

It is essential to remember that the Jesus Prayer is not another prayer *activity*. The focus is on what we become as the prayer is integrated into our daily life. Archimandrite Kallistos reminds us that we are called to become persons of prayer, rather than people who “say their prayers.”³

The purpose of the Jesus Prayer

The only motivation to recite the Jesus Prayer is to place ourselves in the presence of God. It is not an opportunity for relaxation or personal spiritual improvement. The Jesus Prayer is an unapologetically Christian experience based on a life entrusted to Jesus Christ. Our intent in invoking the powerful Name of Jesus is to place ourselves in the presence of God and unite our lives with the divine presence in Jesus and his life of prayer. Archimandrite Kallistos reminds us, also, that the Jesus Prayer is invoked in the context of

² Ware, *The Power of the Name*, 14-15

³ Ware, *The Power of the Name*, 16

the entire Christian community.⁴ Our experience of God is united with the entire Christian community for the life of the world. It is an opportunity to share in the life of God together.

The Power of the Name

The Name in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- The Hebrew word “*shem*” is translated “name”, but it is not simply a person’s identity. *Shem* is an expression of a person’s entire soul with all its blessing (energies) and honor (integrity). *Shem* is an appellation designating a particular person’s soul, but to “call on the name” of the person is to call upon the essence of the person. To call upon the name of a person is to make the essence of that person *present*. The “name” is the “presence.” The name is the soul. The Hebrew understanding of “soul” is the totality of the person. All this is true for God. Solomon built the Temple for the Name of Yahweh. “The people were sacrificing at the high places (pagan sites), however, because no house had been built for the name of the Lord.” (1 Kings 3:2) Israel trusts in the name of Yahweh. “Our soul waits for Adonai; he is our help and our shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.” (psalm 33:20-21)

⁴ Ware, The Power of the Name, 24

- *Shem* is also the manifestation of the inner character of a person and of God. The will of a person and of God is identified with the soul. It is not simply a profound wish or desire. The Name of God is the expression of what lies at the heart of God's being. That same power may be expressed in the life and action of a human being when "God's spirit rests upon him."

The Name in the New Testament:

- In referring to the "essence" of Jesus of Nazareth the canonical gospels call his *shem* "God with us." In the Lord's Prayer the phrase "hallowed be your Name" is Jesus' strong statement of the necessity of acknowledging and honoring the presence of God in our lives. That presence makes all the difference in the world!
 - Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, declares: "Attentively and deliberately to invoke God's Name is to place one's self in his presence, to open one's self to his energy, and to offer one's self as an instrument and a living sacrifice in his hands."

In Matthew's gospel Jesus exhorts his disciples to "Go therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) The baptism is not simply a liturgical action on the part of the disciples. It is placing the person

baptized into the presence and power of God. In a sermon recorded by Luke in Acts 4:10-12 Peter declares that "...there is salvation only in the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth." Peter declared to a lame beggar at the gate to the Temple, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." (Acts 3:6) The essence and power of God is the only source of fullness of life. Paul recognizes the presence of God in Jesus and that wherever that presence is recognized people will bow in recognition. (in the same way that people prostrated themselves in the presence of Christ Jesus after his resurrection. (Philippians 2:10)

The Power of Chanting and Reciting the Name of God:

- The witness and experience of the power of God's Name in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament was continued in the lives of the desert mothers and fathers who placed themselves continually in the presence of God. Their tradition of constant prayer eventually formed the heart of Christian monastic life within Eastern Orthodox Christians and led to the use of what is called "The Jesus Prayer." Although there is power in chanting or reciting the Names of God in any context, the Jesus Prayer has become a

primary way to place one's self in the *constant presence* of the power of God. The usual form of this prayer is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." As we have seen, the last phrase is often omitted.

- A sustained commitment to chanting or reciting the Names of God not only places one's self in *the presence of God*, but also opens the person to the flow of the life-giving *uncreated energies of God*. This openness to God's presence enables a person to receive the promise of Christ "to become participants in the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) This is an awe-filled place to be, involving every aspect of our being. In Eastern Orthodox monasteries the Jesus Prayer is said constantly using a form of rosary with one-hundred knots or beads. When a new monk is given his rosary the abbot says:
 - "Take, brother, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, for continual prayer to Jesus; for you must always have the Name of Jesus in *mind*, in *heart* and on *your lips*; ever saying Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."
- Reciting and chanting the Name of God as a regular prayer practice focuses our attention and energy on God throughout every day and opens a flow of uncreated divine light. We will see the world and its people with new clarity. Divisions break down as we experience the unity of all

things and persons in God. This does not eliminate the challenges or limitations we face in life, but enables us to respond with renewed hope and courage because it is a commitment to what is real and fundamental in life. According to Abba John Cassian seeing the world through God's eyes sets "the mind's attentiveness ablaze" and calls forth "unspeakable ecstasy of heart" and "insatiable gladness of spirit."

The Evolution of the Jesus Prayer in the Desert Mothers and Fathers and Later Monastic Tradition

Very early forms of the Jesus Prayer come from the desert tradition and evolved over the centuries into its commonly accepted form that is the foundation of Eastern Orthodox prayer and theology. Here are selections from *Desert Banquet: A Year of Wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers* which demonstrate this evolution and provide insights, from experience, into the richness of this simple prayer.⁵ These selections, while intended for monks, relate in many ways to our lives in the twenty-first century.

⁵ See Keller, *Desert Banquet*

October 30

Simple, uncluttered experience of Jesus Christ

Abba Macarius was asked, 'How should one pray?' The old man said, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer say, Lord, help!' He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.'"⁶

Macarius' advice is to "keep it simple", and to pray with words *and* body. Later, he recommended a similar prayer to Evagrius that became a prototype of "The Jesus Prayer": *"Evagrius said, 'I visited Abba Macarius, distressed by my thoughts and the passions of the body. I said to him, 'My father, tell me a word so I may live.' Abba Macarius said to me, 'Bind the ship's cable to the mooring anvil and through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the ship will pass through the diabolical waves and tumults of this murky sea and the deep darkness of this vain world.' I said to him, 'What is the ship...the ship's cable...the mooring anvil?' Abba Macarius said to me, 'The ship is your heart...The ship's cable is your spirit; bind it to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the mooring...' For it is not easy to say with each breath, 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. I bless you, Lord Jesus.'"*

⁶ Ward, *Sayings*, Macarius 19, 131.

The prayer of the heart

To drive away the demons, Abba Evagrius exhorted monks to “pray without ceasing.” He learned this from his own abba, Macarius the Great: *“Concentrate on this name of our Lord Jesus Christ with a contrite heart, the words welling up from your lips and drawing you to them. And do not depict him with an image in your mind but concentrate on calling to him: ‘Our Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.’ Do these things in peace and you will see the peace of his divinity within you; he will run off the darkness of the passions that dwell within you and he will purify the inner person (2 Cor. 4:16 & Eph 3:16) just as Adam was pure in paradise.”*⁷

Macarius told his disciples to keep prayer simple with few words. The short prayer *“Our Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.”* became a prototype for a later monastic prayer called “The Jesus Prayer” in Eastern Orthodox traditions. Macarius says that by persistent use of this short prayer, without imaging Jesus, the words will draw you into them and Jesus *“will run off the darkness of the passions that dwell within you and he will purify the inner person.”* In November we will focus on the Jesus Prayer.

⁷ *St Macarius The Spiritbearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great.* Trans. with intro. by Tim Vivian. Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Press, 2004. 117.

Constant watchfulness

In the fifth century, two hundred years after Evagrius and Macarius, there is evidence that a pattern similar to the Jesus Prayer had become a rich part of monastic prayer. By the eighth century this form was an essential part of monastic spiritual formation: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Abba Hesychios of Sinai taught: *Those who lack experience should know that it is only through the unceasing watchfulness of our intellect and the constant invocation of Jesus Christ, our Creator and God, that we, coarse and coddish in mind and body as we are, can overcome our bodiless and invisible enemies, for not only are they subtle, swift, malevolent, and skilled in malice, but they have an experience in warfare gained over all the years since Adam. The inexperienced have as weapons the Jesus Prayer and the impulse to discern what is of God. The experienced have the best method and teacher of all: the activity, discernment, and peace of God himself.*⁸

The Jesus Prayer empowers both “inexperienced” and “experienced” through watchfulness for the faithful presence and power

⁸ *Philokalia*, Selections and Annotations by Allyne Smith, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallitos Ware. Woodstock: Skylight Publications, 2006. 107.

of God, who alone is the source of our transformation

November 2

Biblical cries for health and wholeness

Abba Epiphanius, a Palestinian monk whose abba was Hilarion of Egypt, said: *“The Canaanite woman cries out, and she is heard; the woman with the issue of blood is silent, and she is called blessed; the pharisee speaks, and he is condemned; the publican does not open his mouth, and he is heard.”* He also said, *“God remits the debts of sinners who are penitent, for example, the sinful woman and the publican, but of the righteous man he even asks interest. This is what he says to his apostles, ‘Except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,’ (Matt. 5:20)”*⁹

As we have seen, the Bible, especially the psalms and the gospels, were the focus of meditation for the desert elders. They are also the seed giving birth to Macarius’ prayer for mercy and the Jesus Prayer. The *“Canaanite woman cries out”*, *“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David;”* *“the publican”* (a tax collector) prays silently, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner;”* and *“the woman with the issue of blood”* touches Jesus and explains, trembling, that she knew his energy would heal her. All these cries for forgiveness and healing rely on God’s mercy present in Jesus.

⁹ Ward, *Sayings*, Epiphanius 6 & 15, 57-59.

They are echoed in the Jesus Prayer. What do they tell us?

November 7

Listening in the heart

Abba Philimon said, “*Pay strict attention to your heart and watch over it, so that it does not give admittance to your thoughts that are evil or in any way vain and useless. Without interruption, whether awake or asleep, eating, drinking, or in company, let your heart inwardly and mentally at times be meditating on the Psalms, at other times be repeating the prayer, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.’ And when you chant, make sure that your mouth is not saying one thing while your mind is thinking about another.*”¹⁰

Even though every human being has an inner room, Philimon reminds us that each person should pay “*strict attention to your heart and watch over it*”. We will experience God’s presence within ourselves by intentionally spending time in our inner sanctuary “*without interruption*”. Listening to God’s voice requires careful discipline so that we do not give “*admittance to . . . thoughts that are evil or in any way vain and useless.*” Philimon suggests two ways to pray in our inner room, available during every aspect of daily life. The Psalms, chanted aloud or silently, and repetition of the Jesus Prayer each have advantages at different

¹⁰ *Philokalia*, Selections and Annotations, 113.

times of the day. Each may be recited with a rhythm that eventually will unite words and thoughts without distraction.

November 10

The power of the Name

Abba Philotheos of Sinai said, *“The blessed remembrance of God – which is the very presence of Jesus – with a heart full of wrath and a saving animosity against the demons, dissolves all trickeries of thought, plots, argumentation, fantasies, obscure conjectures, and, in short, everything with which the destroyer arms himself and that he insolently deploys in his attempt to swallow our souls. When Jesus is invoked, he promptly burns up everything. For our salvation lies in Christ Jesus alone. The Savior himself made this clear when he said: ‘Without me you can do nothing.’ (John 15:5)”*¹¹

The name of God in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament is not simply a way to describe or identify the God of Abraham and Jesus. Middle Eastern culture, which included and still includes most of the desert elders, asserted that a “name” embodies both the characteristics and presence of the one who is named. To invoke the name of a person, or God, is to invoke their presence and the energies of their being. Philotheos, who emphasized the crucial virtue of watchfulness in prayer, demonstrates the power of combining the

¹¹ Ibid., 113.

invocation of God, “*which is the very presence of Jesus*”, with the soul’s desire for mercy. Jesus’ presence will bring forth transformation.

November 14

Entering uncharted territory

By the eleventh century the Jesus Prayer was used throughout the Middle East. There were several patterns for its use, but *The Method of Sacred Prayer* was common and eventually influenced use of the Jesus Prayer in monasteries on Mt. Athos, Greece and in Russia. Attributed to Symeon the New Theologian, its origin is uncertain.

“Then sit down in a quiet cell, in a corner by yourself, and do what I tell you. Close the door, and withdraw your intellect from everything worthless and transient. Rest your head on your chest, and focus your physical gaze, together with the whole of your intellect, on the center of your belly or navel. Restrain the drawing-in of breath through your nostrils, so as not to breathe easily, and search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all the powers of the soul reside. To start with, you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees things of which it previously knew

nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds itself entirely luminous and full of discrimination."¹²

November 15

Simplicity and Flexibility

The Jesus Prayer has become a fundamental part of the spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox churches. Its roots lie in the prayer of the desert elders, yet it spread, also, to Christian faith communities in the west with the English publication of *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Yet it remains simple, as Bishop Kallistos Ware describes:

"The Invocation of the Name is a prayer of the utmost simplicity, accessible to every Christian, but it leads at the same time to the deepest mysteries of contemplation...No specialized knowledge or training is required before commencing on the Jesus Prayer. To the beginner it is sufficient to say: Simply begin...The outward form of the prayer is easily learnt. Basically it consists of the words 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' There is, however, no uniformity. We can say, '...have mercy on us,' instead of 'on me.' The verbal formula can be shortened: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Or 'Lord Jesus', or even 'Jesus' alone, although this is less common. Alternatively, the form of the words may be expanded by adding 'a sinner' at the end, thus underlining the penitential

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

*aspect...The one essential and unvarying element is the inclusion of the divine Name 'Jesus'."*¹³

For further reading:

Simon Barrington-Ward. *The Jesus Prayer*. Oxford: Bible REading Fellowship, 1996

Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia. *The Power of the Name*. Fairacres: SLG Press, 1986

Irénée Hausherr. *The Name of Jesus*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1978.

A Monk of the Eastern Church. *The Jesus Prayer*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987.

The Way of the Pilgrim. Translated by R.M. French. New York: Harper/HarperCollins, 1954, 1965, 1973. ISBN 0-06-063017-5

¹³ Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia. *The Power of the Name*. Oxford: SLG Press, 1986. 4-5.