

The RHYTHM of PRAYER

a forty day experience

mark a. moore



Indianapolis, Indiana

INTRODUCTION

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If you had chanced to walk along Delancy Street on the Lower East Side during the summer of 1959, you might have heard the faint sounds of a tenor saxophone echoing off the massive steel girders of the Williamsburg Bridge, filling Manhattan's early morning air with gentle rhythm. The man behind the melodies was burgeoning jazz legend Sonny Rollins. By the age of nineteen, this self-taught virtuoso had collaborated with some of jazz's most innovative performers: Miles Davis, Theolonius Monk, Bud Powell, and Charlie "Bird" Parker. With the release of his masterpiece album, *Saxophone Colossus*, in 1956, Rollins, or "Newk" as he was known by friends, established himself as one of the most talented musicians of his time.

On the Williamsburg Bridge, though, Newk wasn't working on a concert set or arrangements for a new recording. He was withdrawing from the jazz scene altogether, taking an extended Sabbath at the height of his career to remaster the basics of jazz composition. Dissatisfied with the music business and the fame, Rollins felt that his ability to improvise on traditional jazz melodies had weakened because he had strayed too far from the foundational elements of his art—disciplines he insisted on maintaining even if it cost him his career. This hunger to create pure music struck Rollins a few years prior, during a concert at the Village Vanguard—an electric performance that produced, by many accounts, some of the most innovative improvisational recordings in jazz history. Yet he knew there was more.

Rollins understood that music has a basic structure, a foundation of scales and rhythms upon which all melodies are built. True improvisation has to bridge off of this foundation. Ignorance of it

does not lead to innovation; it leads to shallow art. Offbeats and dissonant chords make sense only when intentionally placed within a structure of downbeat rhythms and consonant chords. To improvise only on previous improvisations, stifles creativity and transposes art into meaningless expressions. Improvisational jazz would sound no different than children banging on pots and pans were it not for the boundaries of rhythm and scale. Only skilled musicians, those who have studied the parameters of musicology, can improvise, bending the rules intentionally to speak to their audience. So when Sonny Rollins inserted a chord he knew did not fit, it was because he wanted his listeners to feel the tension; he created dissonance not for its own sake, but to be in contrast with harmony. Improvisation finds its power in intentionality.

So in 1959, Rollins returned to the roots of not only jazz composition but also basic music theory, using Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* as a guide. It was these melodic scales that a few lucky New Yorkers heard while making their morning commute during those stifling summer months.

Prayer is a mirror of music. It, too, has a basic structure, a foundation of theology and intentionality. Throughout history, Christians have developed the practice of prayer upon this base—a practice infused with Scripture, guided by the Spirit, and built upon basic elements. More recently, and rightly so, improvisational prayer has become common; yet it has brought with it the same weakness that Sonny Rollins detected in his music—the weakness that comes from straying too far from the basic structures of the form.

In his collection *Essays in Applied Christianity*, Reinhold Niebuhr spoke to the “weakness of common worship” as it related to American Protestantism and Evangelicalism. Niebuhr applauded the positives of Evangelicalism—its desire to touch hearts and souls with the Word of God and free worship—but he wondered if by 1950 the movement had already passed its prime. Just as Rollins explored the fundamental elements of music on the Bridge, Niebuhr encouraged evangelicals to create a new liturgy, one that might provide a

meaningful foundation for their honest expressions of worship.

The evangelical, free-form worship movement that occurred in America early in the twentieth century was greatly needed. But now many of us seem to be improvising on that earlier improvisation. The result is a practice of prayer that has strayed too far from its roots. Our prayers are often self-serving because they lack a proper theology, and they are unintentional due to our own laziness.

The use of a prayer liturgy offers a return to the basic elements that make for a meaningful prayer life. Liturgy provides a structure, an intentionality—a rhythm—which we need in order to have a deep and meaningful experience in prayer. By using a prayer liturgy, improvisation is not replaced; it is grounded. Freedom is not constrained; it is focused.

THE BENEFIT OF A DAILY PRAYER LITURGY

A prayer liturgy is a guide for structuring a meaningful prayer experience. It places Scripture readings, written prayers, and times of contemplation into a set structure. For many, excessive freedom and a lack of structure have led to the absence of prayer, save for a few quick head bows before meals. It is not that the use of liturgy alone has the power to form our spirit but rather that the consistency provided by the liturgy acts as a catalyst in opening our souls in a daily rhythm before God and his Word. This rhythm escorts body and soul to a place where it is possible to experience a deep, consuming conversation with Almighty God.

A daily prayer liturgy provides consistency because it has rhythm, which is always intentional. Rhythm has a resolute timing that both draws us back and moves us forward. Not one prayer, Scripture reading, or intercession is placed in the liturgy by accident. Each word is carefully selected to open the soul to the Lord in contemplation and praise. A common problem with free-form worship is that it fails to intentionally direct the heart to God. An unintentional prayer life exhibits the same weakness.

Many Christians wonder how to gain consistency in their devotional life. Some start and restart devotional practices many times, reading the same few passages and praying more or less the same prayers over and over again. A daily prayer liturgy is directive; it leads us. It takes the guesswork out of what to do on any given day, providing a reliable starting point for prayer and Bible meditation. Rather than thumbing through the Bible each day, usually arriving at the Gospel of John or Psalm 23, we are gently guided into a contemplative moment based on a thoughtful offering of Scripture and prayer.

The muse and source of our creativity in prayer is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us on the path of daily prayer, encouraging us, and pointing out areas where we need to pause and spend extended time in meditation. The Spirit fills our hearts with God's heart so that our prayers reflect his will. Currently, there is a great emphasis on maintaining personal freedom in prayer. In our enthusiasm to explore our own styles, though, we have forgotten that there is freedom within the lines. The creation of meaningful music, poetry, and visual arts demands innovation, yet each discipline has basic rules—lines that only experienced artists can cross without compromising the form.

Liturgical daily prayer is not a panacea for all devotional ills. It is a form, and like any form, it can grow cold and void of passion. Yet when the uncritical application of freedom has produced a passionless prayer life, a daily prayer liturgy can provide the impetus needed to reestablish the rhythm of prayer for which the heart longs.

THE METHOD OF THIS LITURGY

Daily liturgical prayer is a spiritual practice that has developed since the earliest days of the Church. As a young believer, I was introduced to this discipline by a journal article on praying the daily office—a regimen of praying at specific hours throughout the day. The article came at the right time in my life. I was hungry for a consistent

devotional experience. I picked up a copy of *The Book of Common Prayer* but felt confused by the structure of the book, which divides the various elements of the liturgy into different sections throughout the work. I needed to see each element of the liturgy placed in sequence to truly appreciate the beauty of this form. That has been my desire in compiling this liturgy: to create an easy-to-follow introduction to the rhythm of daily prayer.

Before we proceed with the liturgy itself, let's walk through the elements included in this format. It may be helpful to think of each day as a unique song, with a unique melody and meter. Some days, the beat will be fast, the melody racing. On others, the cadence sporadic, the melody dissonant. Each one, however, will be built from the same elements—an intentional foundation—that will form the day's experience.

RUBRICS

In any prayer book, the rubrics are the basic directions for the liturgy—the fine print between each section. Traditional prayer books are used in public services and contain different elements separated by multiple pages. The rubrics for those prayer books serve as a conductor for the order of service, prescribing which hymn to sing or antiphon to use on a given holy day. Because this liturgy is designed for personal use, I have reinvented the rubrics as subtle worship prompts. They will guide you through each day's prayers and Scripture selections.

OPENING SENTENCE

Seven different sentences are used to open this liturgy, all adapted from various psalms. They are repeated in a seven-day cycle. Internalize these calls to worship, and allow them to direct your thoughts toward God.

After each opening sentence, the liturgy continues with an adaptation of the *Gloria Patri*—a common refrain from the early Church, which offers praise to the triune, unchanging nature of God.

INVITATORY PSALM

After the opening sentence and Gloria Patri, a psalm is read as an invitation to praise. These invitatory psalms also are repeated on a seven-day cycle. The phrases in italics are antiphons, which were used in corporate prayer services as responses that reinforce the message of the psalm. Take your time here, and say each word with purpose.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

After the invitation of worship has been accepted, time is allowed to prepare your heart and mind through confession. You will notice that the voice is plural—a reminder that you are not alone. We are each a part of one body. Allow the Holy Spirit to indicate the amount of time to be spent in this section each day. On some days it will be brief. On others, you may spend your entire devotional time on this element.

THE PSALTER

Following this moment of honest reflection, you will read another psalm. The psalms chosen for this forty-day liturgy come from Book I (Psalms 1–41) and Book IV (Psalms 90–106), which prompt us to worship God for the mighty works he has done. The Latin titles for each psalm, which are simply the first few words of the psalm, are also included here to give a sense of the long history of praying the psalms.

READING FROM SACRED SCRIPTURE

Next you will read a longer portion of Scripture. This liturgy uses selections from Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Romans, as well as large portions from the book of Isaiah. Remember that Scripture is one of the elements that makes prayer a dialogue. This is God's part of the conversation. Listen with an open heart.

INTERCESSION

Now comes the time for you to express your own needs in your own way. Fill this time with prayers of petition or praise. Following this time of personal prayer, a written intercession is

read. As with the opening sentences and invitational psalms, seven intercessions have been chosen and are repeated. The first two of these intercessions are suffrages, brief prayers that have been passed down in liturgies throughout Church history. The rest are adaptations I have created using Scriptures ranging from Psalm 30 to the Beatitudes.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

When Christ's disciples were seeking a structure for the spiritual life, they inquired of Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1 NLT). Jesus didn't reply with a long sermon on the nature of prayer, nor did he direct the disciples to do whatever they felt like doing. His lesson on prayer was a prayer.

He said, "This is how you should pray:

Father, may your name be honored.

May your Kingdom come soon.

Give us our food day by day.

And forgive our sins—

just as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

And don't let us yield to temptation" (Luke 11:2–4 NLT).

Jesus gave us a form-prayer, not to teach us what to say in prayer, but to exemplify the proper spirit to have in prayer. The Lord's Prayer is included in this liturgy as a continual reminder against making selfish prayers. First and foremost, Jesus praised God. He asked only for sustenance, forgiveness, and the will of the Father. We do well to do the same.

SILENCE

Between the Lord's Prayer and the concluding prayer, a moment of silent meditation is directed by the rubrics. Again, the amount of time spent here will fluctuate by day; life happens and schedules constrain.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

A Scripture-infused written prayer concludes each day's liturgy. Six original prayers are used in this liturgy, each one repeated for seven consecutive days (with the exception of the last of the six prayers, which is repeated for only five consecutive days). They bring closure to each day's liturgy and form a benediction upon the day.

So pause and take a deep breath. Listen for the downbeat, and pray in step with God's rhythm.

DAY ONE

DAY ONE

Quiet your heart before the LORD, then proceed as you feel ready.

LORD, open our lips,
And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever: from unending to unending.
Amen.

For the mighty works of God, lift your praises.

PSALM 100

Jubilate Deo

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands.

Serve the LORD with gladness:

come before his presence with singing.

Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands.

Know ye that the LORD he is God:

it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands.

Enter into his gates with thanksgiving,

and into his courts with praise:

be thankful unto him, and bless his name.

Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands.

For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting;

and his truth endureth to all generations.

His love and mercy endure forever.

Let us kneel and ask God to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Most holy and gracious God, we confess to you that we don't always get it right. We don't always love as you have called us to love. We don't often enough answer your invitation to serve. We don't continually seek the lost. But Father, you get it right with us every time. Accept our humble confession, and sanctify us by the power and beauty of your Word, that we may live in the light of your goodness, serve with the warmth of your gentleness, and love with the passion of your grace. Forever and ever, let it be so.

Pause for a moment to reflect on your repentance.

Then join with the psalmist's heart, giving praise and adoration.

PSALM 1

Beatus Vir Qui non Abiit

Blessed is the man
that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,
nor standeth in the way of sinners,
nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.
But his delight is in the law of the LORD;
and in his law doth he meditate day and night.
And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,
that bringeth forth his fruit in his season;
his leaf also shall not wither;
and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.
The ungodly are not so:
but are like the chaff
which the wind driveth away.
Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous:
but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Open your ears to hear the Word of the Lord.

A READING FROM SACRED SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 1:3–14 (The Message)

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Pray now for your own needs and for the needs of others.

Allot ample time to freely express your prayers.

INTERCESSION

Save your people, Lord, and bless your inheritance;

Govern and uphold them, now and always.

Day by day we bless you;

We praise your name forever.

Lord, keep us from all sin today;

Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy.

Lord, show us your love and mercy;

For we put our trust in you.

In you, Lord, is our hope;

And we shall never hope in vain.

The disciples inquired, "Lord, teach us to pray." We join with his reply.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Spend a few moments in silence, meditating on the Lord.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Everlasting God, you have been faithful in your promise to never leave us nor forsake us. May you set us apart this day to be holy, to be wholly yours, so that with each movement of the hours, our hearts will be drawn to you in loving prayer and honest devotion. In the blessed name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, amen.

DAY TWO

DAY TWO

Quiet your heart before the Lord, then proceed as you feel ready.

May the words of our mouths
And the meditations of our hearts
Be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever: from unending to unending. Amen.

For the mighty works of God, lift your praises.

PSALM 147:1–9

Laudate Domine

Praise ye the LORD:
for it is good to sing praises unto our God;
for it is pleasant; and praise is comely.

It is good to praise the LORD.

The LORD doth build up Jerusalem:
he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel.

He healeth the broken in heart,
and bindeth up their wounds.

The LORD is worthy of praise.

He telleth the number of the stars;
he calleth them all by their names.

Great is our Lord, and of great power:
his understanding is infinite.

The LORD lifteth up the meek:
 he casteth the wicked down to the ground.
Our God is great and mighty.
Sing unto the LORD with thanksgiving;
 sing praise upon the harp unto our God:
Who covereth the heaven with clouds,
 who prepareth rain for the earth,
 who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains.
He giveth to the beast his food,
 and to the young ravens which cry.
Sing to the LORD who provides.

Let us kneel and ask God to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Most holy and gracious God, we confess to you that we don't always get it right. We don't always love as you have called us to love. We don't often enough answer your invitation to serve. We don't continually seek the lost. But Father, you get it right with us every time. Accept our humble confession, and sanctify us by the power and beauty of your Word, that we may live in the light of your goodness, serve with the warmth of your gentleness, and love with the passion of your grace. Forever and ever, let it be so.

Pause for a moment to reflect on your repentance.

Then join with the psalmist's heart, giving praise and adoration.

PSALM 3:1–6

Domine, Quid Multiplicati?

LORD, how are they increased that trouble me!
 many are they that rise up against me.
Many there be which say of my soul,
 There is no help for him in God.
Selah.
But thou, O LORD, art a shield for me;

my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.
 I cried unto the LORD with my voice,
 and he heard me out of his holy hill.
 Selah.
 I laid me down and slept;
 I awaked; for the LORD sustained me.
 I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people,
 that have set themselves against me round about.

Open your ears to hear the Word of the Lord.

A READING FROM SACRED SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 2:12–18 (NCV)

The LORD All-Powerful has a certain day planned when he will punish the proud and those who brag, and they will no longer be important.

He will bring down the tall cedar trees from Lebanon and the great oak trees of Bashan, all the tall mountains and the high hills, every tall tower and every high, strong wall, all the trading ships and the beautiful ships.

At that time proud people will be made humble, and they will bow low with shame. At that time only the LORD will be praised, but all the idols will be gone.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Pray now for your own needs and for the needs of others.

Allot ample time to freely express your prayers.

INTERCESSION

We will exalt your name, O Lord,
For you have heard our cries,
 And you have healed us.
The Lord has lifted us up from the depths.

We will sing praises to you our Lord,

For your anger is fleeting,

But your favor lasts forever.

The Lord has lifted us up from the depths.

Our hearts cannot stay silent,

Forever we will give you thanks.

The Lord has lifted us up from the depths.

The disciples inquired, "Lord, teach us to pray." We join with his reply.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Spend a few moments in silence, meditating on the Lord.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Everlasting God, you have been faithful in your promise to never leave us nor forsake us. May you set us apart this day to be holy, to be wholly yours, so that with each movement of the hours, our hearts will be drawn to you in loving prayer and honest devotion. In the blessed name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, amen.