



“Shall We Not Speak to Him?” What to Do with the Prayers in the Workbook

by Robert Perry

What do we do with all those prayers in Part II of the Workbook? Once we reach that second part, with each new lesson we turn to there is another one of those prayers staring us in the face, confronting us yet again with the question “What exactly am I supposed to do with this?”

My impression is that there is a kind of unspoken agreement among the majority of Course students about this issue, which says, “Those are obviously just metaphor. Clearly, we aren’t supposed to actually *pray* them.” I say this in part because I often recommend that people do pray those prayers, and on both sides of the Atlantic I am typically greeted with a kind of confused silence, after which someone finally reminds me of the obvious: “But those are just metaphor.” It’s as if I had suggested that, in response to the high cost of gasoline, they simply flap their arms and fly to work.

How did we reach this consensus, in which we all “know” that these prayers are not meant to be prayed? Isn’t it strange to think that after writing 140 prayers, the author of the Course silently whispered, “Now please ignore these”? I suspect the reason this agreement was so broadly and easily reached is that praying to God doesn’t fit our picture of God in the Course. I think we see Him as too impersonal or too remote for us to be able to engage in a conversational relationship with Him. I think all of that strikes us as too much like old-time religion in which God can cover Moses with His hand so Moses can’t see Him. If we start praying to God, what’s next? Should we all start singing praise songs while waving our hands in the air?

What I want to propose is that we really look at this issue with an open mind; that we look for clues as to what the Course really intends for us to do with these prayers. The results may be quite surprising, and may possibly open up to us a whole new dimension of the Course and of the spiritual life, one that we just might find deeply satisfying.

Does God hear prayers?

This is the basic question. If God doesn’t hear us, then there is obviously no point in speaking to Him. And it certainly seems as if God *can’t* hear us, given the Course’s view of reality. After all, we are *here*, in an illusory world that never happened, and God is *there*, completely outside that illusion, a formless God in a formless reality. How can our words bridge that divide? How can our tiny verbal forms be understood by a God Who “knows not form” (T-30.III.4:5)?

Such considerations would seem to settle the matter, except for one thing: That is not how the Course talks. As I often point out, the Course repeatedly says that God hears every call to Him and answers every one, and it never says—not once—that God does not hear our prayers. Both parts of this are key, so let’s look at each one separately.

The first part is that God always hears. I’ve found eighteen passages over the years that say that God hears every call/prayer and answers every one. Here are four of those passages. Please read them as if you are taking them seriously, as if what they say is actually true:

The Bible emphasizes that all prayer is answered, and this is indeed true. (T-9.II.3:1)

For it can never be that His Son called upon Him and remained unanswered. (T-13.VI.9:4)

God has promised He will hear my call and answer me Himself. (W-327.1:2)

Your prayer has risen up and called to God, Who hears and answers. (S-3.IV.4:2)

These passages—and fourteen other ones—sound quite absolute and definitive. Yet surely they are balanced out by more literal passages in which the Course assures us that this traditional-sounding view is not the *real* truth. This brings us to the second part: The Course never says that God does not hear our prayers. This can seem quite surprising, yet it is completely true. I’ve never found any passages that say that God does not hear us, and I’ve only ever seen *one* passage quoted in support of that idea. So let’s look at that passage, recognizing that this is the *sole* “support” in the Course for God not hearing our prayers:

Think not He hears the little prayers of those who call on Him with names of idols cherished by the world.
(W-pI.183.7:3)

This sentence does indeed say, “Think not He hears the little prayers...” And if we isolate that one little part, we could possibly get the impression that God doesn’t hear us. Yet even this one sentence is clearly making a qualified statement, not an absolute one. It’s saying there is a particular *class* of prayers God doesn’t hear, namely “little prayers of those who call on Him with names of idols cherished by the world.” What are these “little prayers”?

To answer that, we need to look at the larger passage in which this sentence appears. The passage is actually part of a meditation instruction in Lesson 183, which begins in paragraph 6 of that lesson:

Practice but this today; repeat God’s Name slowly again and still again. Become oblivious to every name but His. (W-pI.183.6:1-2)

The instructions, then, are very simple: Repeat only God’s Name, not other names. The identity of these other names may seem puzzling, but in fact they are mentioned throughout the lesson, leaving no doubt as to what they are. Earlier, for instance, they are called “the names of all the gods you valued” (4:3) and “the tiny, nameless things on earth” (5:2). They are, in fact, the names of all the worldly things you desire—and *tend to think about during meditation*. So the instruction becomes this: Repeat only God’s Name; don’t let your thoughts wander to all those worldly things you value.

The next paragraph then tells us what will happen if we follow this instruction. As that paragraph also happens to be where we find that crucial line about God not hearing our “little prayers,” please pay close attention to what it says:

Thus do we give an invitation which can never be refused. And God will come, and answer it Himself.
Think not He hears the little prayers of those who call on Him with names of idols cherished by the world.
(W-pI.183.7:1-3)

In context, what this means is now perfectly clear. If we call “God’s Name slowly again and still again” (as we were told earlier), then we “give an invitation [obviously, to God] which can never be refused.” And in response to this invitation, “God will come, and answer it Himself.” Our meditation, in other words, will be successful; we will experience God. If, however, our thoughts wander to all the normal stuff we value, it’s as if we are praying to our idols, not to God; in which case, we are *not* inviting Him and He will not come. Our meditation will be a dud.

Remember, this is the sole support for the idea that God doesn’t hear prayers. But doesn’t it actually say the precise *opposite*? It says that if you call to God, He will come (obviously implying He heard you). But if instead you spend your whole meditation fantasizing about breakfast, don’t think He will hear that “prayer” and come to you. How strange that a passage saying that God will answer our invitation has been turned into “proof” that God can’t hear us!

The Course, then, gives a single, consistent answer to the question of whether God hears prayers: *He does*. It’s true the Course says that He hears us *through* the Holy Spirit, that some kind of translation happens in which the Holy Spirit makes our prayers understandable to a transcendent God (see, for instance, T-14.IV.10). But if you and I are talking on the phone and I say, “Yes, I can hear you, but only through this phone,” would you then conclude that I *can’t* hear you?

Does the Course ask us to actually say words to God?

So, on a theoretical level there is absolutely no barrier to us talking to God. But does the Course take the next step and actually *instruct* us to talk to God, to speak to Him using words? Since we are discussing the prayers in the Workbook, we can make the question more specific: Does the Workbook instruct us to speak to God?

This question is surprisingly easy to answer. To begin with, we can note that repeating words is the most common form of practice that the Workbook asks us to do. Indeed, the Workbook *requires* us to repeat certain words. “Requires”

is strong language, but the Workbook itself frequently uses this language (twenty-six times, by my count) in telling us what it wants us to do on a given day. As a result, missing practice periods amounts to “failing to comply with the requirements of this course” (W-pI.95.9:1).

This has direct bearing on whether the Course instructs us to speak to God, because in a great many cases, the words the Workbook tells us to repeat are *words we say to God*. Here is one example, in which the Workbook explicitly tells us to “pray” to our “Father”:

With nothing in our hands to which we cling, with lifted hearts and listening minds we pray:

Only salvation can be said to cure.

Speak to us, Father, that we may be healed. (W-pI.140.12:1-3)

Here is another example, in which we ask God (not the Holy Spirit) to give us guidance for our day:

Remembering this, let us devote the remainder of the extended practice periods to asking God to reveal His plan to us. Ask Him very specifically:

What would You have me do?

Where would You have me go?

What would You have me say, and to whom? (W-pI.71.9:1-5)

Of course the main thing we repeat each day in the Workbook is the idea for the day, the lesson title. Significantly, fourteen of these lesson titles are addressed directly to God. They are Lessons 168, 231, 232, 234, 245, 277, 283, 287, 298, 321, 327, 329, 331, and 348. Since practicing the lesson means repeating the lesson title, it is literally impossible to do those fourteen lessons without talking to God.

Significantly, the first of those fourteen lessons opens by addressing any hesitancy we might feel about talking to God. To appreciate the effect of this, imagine that you yourself have just reached Lesson 168 and see that its title is “Your grace is given me. I claim it now.” You realize that for the first time you are supposed to say the idea for the day directly to God. Is this appropriate, you wonder? As if reading your mind, the next words you encounter—the opening lines of the lesson—address your question:

God speaks to us. Shall we not speak to Him? He is not distant. He makes no attempt to hide from us.

We try to hide from Him, and suffer from deception. He remains entirely accessible. He loves His Son.

(W-pI.168.1:1-7)

These lines are a direct, and beautiful, answer to our hesitancy to speak to God. If God speaks to us, why wouldn’t we speak to Him? When someone talks to us, do we typically respond with silence? Perhaps we assume God is too remote to hear us, but the truth is the opposite: “He is not distant.” We may think He’s hiding from us, but *we* are the ones hiding from Him; or rather, *trying* to hide—the belief that we have successfully hidden is labeled a mere “deception.” No matter how far we think we have removed ourselves from Him, He is right here. “He remains entirely accessible.” Why? Because “He loves His Son.” What loving father would make himself inaccessible to his own son?

These lines, in other words, completely reverse our usual assumptions about God’s accessibility. We see ourselves as the ones trying to bridge the gap; we call, we reach out, but are met with stony silence. Instead, it is precisely the other way around. God is the One Who has crossed the bridge and holds out His Hand and calls us by name; we are the ones who have hidden behind a bush. Shall we not come out and take His Hand? “Shall we not speak to Him?”

So, based on what we have seen, should you speak to God while doing the Workbook? The answer: You can’t do the Workbook *without* speaking to God.

Praying the prayers

I’ll never forget the first time I prayed the prayers in Part II of the Workbook. I had been with the Course for fifteen years and it had never occurred to me that I should actually pray them. At the time, I was on a personal retreat and I decided to find out what I should do with those prayers. After doing some investigating, I concluded that the Workbook really did want me to pray them. So I did. I spent about an hour going through the first twenty or so of the prayers in Part II and saying them to God.

The effect was astonishing. The sense of nearness and intimacy with God took me completely by surprise. It was as if God was right there, loving me and wanting only to help; as if He was the perfect benign presence that I could always turn to and trust; as if He was the warm embrace I was always searching for as I stumbled through a cold and heartless world.

That hour was a turning point for me. I hadn't realized that I was supposed to think about God like that, feel toward God like that, relate to God like that.

From that time onward, I have used those prayers regularly, almost daily. At one time or another I've memorized all of them (I only wish I could retain that memory!), simply because it spares me from the clunky process of switching back and forth between opening my eyes and closing them, allowing me to focus instead on just praying the prayer. I'll often pick a prayer and say it on the hour throughout the day. I've made collections of my favorite ones for personal use. I've taught people to pray them in classes, workshops, and retreats. And I've written a number of articles about particular prayers.

Like everything else in the Course, these prayers are teachers; they shift your perception. And that is their point. Unlike conventional prayer, their purpose is not to bend God's Mind in your direction; it is to bend your mind in His. They do not ask Him to service your earthly needs; they ask for all the things—such as peace and true perception—that constitute forward movement on your journey to Him. They are not a way to pull God down so that He does your bidding; they are a way to lift you up into nearness to Him. And that, I believe, is their value. They draw you into relationship with God, into what the Course calls “the only relationship [you] ever had, and ever want to have” (T-15.XI.9:5).

It may seem artificial and unnecessary to pray prayers written down in a book, rather than just speaking to God ourselves. Yet without their guidance we will never speak to God in the way these prayers do. They are really an entirely different way of talking to God. Traditionally, we assume we need to “butter up” God with lavish praise, before we meekly ask Him for what we want. In these prayers, however, there is no praise or worship in any conventional sense. There are also no flowery ways of addressing God; we usually just call Him “Father,” as if our place as His beloved child is simply assumed. And our requests are stated with such confidence in His generosity that—if you can believe it—we never once say “please.” Instead, we usually *tell* Him what to do, in the knowledge that He is just waiting for the chance to lavish His gifts on us. Here is one example: “Be in my mind, my Father, when I wake, and shine on me throughout the day today” (W-pI.232.1:1). Do we trust God's Love enough to speak to Him like that?

How do we pray these prayers? The key thing is just to do your best to *mean* them. Try to be sincere in saying the words. To say any of the words sincerely, though, two things are required: You need to say them *to* God, and to expect He will hear you. Otherwise, it is not a sincere communication at all.

In terms of the mechanics, unless you have the prayer memorized, you will need to read a sentence, fix that sentence in your mind, close your eyes, say that sentence to God, then open your eyes and repeat the process. It may seem that this goes without saying, but in my experience people resist this multi-stepped process tremendously. I can't tell you how many times I've asked a class to do this, only to notice that after their eyes close the first time, they never open again! It's true, it takes effort to go through the process I just outlined. It is far easier just to close your eyes and float. But floating will not give you the benefits of the prayer.

If your mind is open to the value of praying these prayers, please take the next step with me and try one out. For this, I have chosen what is possibly my favorite one, which I still use all the time. It is the prayer for Lesson 232, “Be in my mind, my Father, through the day.” Obviously, the title itself is a prayer to God. So why wouldn't you simply continue with this prayer by speaking to Him the lines that follow it and simply elaborate on it?

Before you do, remember to say each line *to God*, really expecting Him to hear. Try to *mean* each line, giving it as much sincerity as you can muster. This implies that there are no throwaway lines, no blanks. See each word as saturated with meaning and significance. Each line, if said sincerely, expresses a depth of feeling.

Now fix one line at a time in your mind (using the way I have laid them out below), close your eyes and say it sincerely to God, and then repeat the process. Resist the temptation to keep your eyes closed and float. Give yourself the full benefit by completing the prayer. And if you reach the end and want to go through it again, you will receive even more benefit. Okay, go ahead and start now:

*Be in my mind, my Father, when I wake,
and shine on me throughout the day today.
Let every minute be a time in which I dwell with You.
And let me not forget my hourly thanksgiving that You have remained with me,
and always will be there to hear my call to You and answer me.
As evening comes, let all my thoughts be still of You and of Your Love.
And let me sleep sure of my safety, certain of Your care, and happily aware I am Your Son.*

What did you feel? Did you sense the potential that lies in this for you? By looking through this small window, did you catch a glimpse of a whole new landscape?



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CIRCLE MAILBOX

Here are some responses we received to Greg's article in A Better Way #125, "The Ultimate Problem-Solving Repertoire: How A Course in Miracles Has Helped Us in Couples Counseling—and How It Could Become a Helper of the World."

Congratulations and thanks for your recent article. How generous and giving of you two to share your experience in couples counseling. First of all, the article itself was a "tour de force" in how well it was written and how skilled the relating of your counseling experience interwoven with Course experience.

I found it to be personally inspiring as well. I am retired as a therapist/social worker. I did a lot of couples counseling in the past and found it difficult and not very rewarding. I think with the addition of ACIM theory, my work might have been more effective. Mind you, couples motivated like you and Patricia are indeed rare.

My husband and I attended Robert's keynote lecture in Sedona and found it wonderfully helpful to us as a couple married for forty years. We were able to recommit ourselves to a better way!

— Judy Robb

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I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your article in this month's *Better Way*. I appreciate your honesty and your insights. Thanks for this and all your writing, Greg. It very helpful.

— George Porter