



Follow Me as I Follow Christ...

IN PRAYER

BY ALICIA BRITT CHOLE

I confess: "Why" is one of my favourite words because it anchors the visible (and temporal) with the invisible (and eternal).

On a ship, anchors beneath the water ensure that the vessel above the water does not drift too far from a point of reference or safety. In the life of a servant, the anchor of *why* likewise ensures that our visible plans and activities do not drift too far from their initial inspiration and ultimate purpose.

How easy it is in the fullness of leadership to cut anchor, to stop asking *why*, to disconnect the visible from the invisible, to allow success to distance us from source, to wake up and realize that our lives and words have inspired others to be busy ... without a clear (and consequently sustainable) cause.

So, when asked to write on prayer from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:9, and specifically to address equipping ministers to lead others into a life of prayer, the first question I asked (not surprisingly) was "why"? Why do we want to encourage those we lead to pray?





WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF A WAVE OF LEADERS ACKNOWLEDGED THEIR HUNGER— THEIR NEED FOR A MORE INTIMATE PRAYER LIFE— AND INVITED THOSE THEY LEAD INTO THEIR JOURNEYS?

Because Jesus taught His disciples to pray?

Because they should?

So their needs will be met?

To help them ... sin less? Give more? Mature more quickly?

Our answer will dictate our emphasis, and our emphasis will affect their motivation.

Perhaps the question should move closer to home: Why do we, as leaders, pray? I can answer that only for myself. I pray because I breathe. Each breath shouts God's existence. As a former atheist, the reality that God makes Himself knowable is still unspeakably overwhelming. We are because He is. We live because He loves.

Prayer is to our spirits what breathing is to our bodies: an organic essential of true life.

Our Father In Heaven

Matthew places what would become one of the most recited prayers of all time in the midst of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—a message that, line upon line, presses us to live a faith that is sincere to the core.

In the parallel passage in Luke, one of the disciples requested of Jesus, "Teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The student asked a question in the plural, and the teacher answered with a prayer entirely in the plural, beginning with the possessive pronoun *our*. Why?

Perhaps because *our* coalesces individuals into groups and then transforms groups into families. *Our* is the first key that empowers us to lead others into a life of prayer. *Our* introduces a collective calling, a common commitment, a co-operative act of faith. *Our* in the life of Jesus meant that others saw Him praying, caught Him praying, and prayed with Him at His invitation.

Two examples of *our* in decades past transformed me. As a new follower of Jesus, my first experiences with prayer in the plural took place in the home of Sister Helena Kach on

the border of Mexico. Every Thursday night, the Kachs would invite the youth over to their house for "prayer meetin'."

Sister Kach would hand out a dozen worn, coffee-stained song booklets and, with her accordion, lead us in stirring worship. Simple chorus after simple chorus, our small circle would enter a holy place. Without cue, God's tangible presence silenced us.

New to faith, I was unaware of the "eyes closed" rule, so I quite literally watched and prayed. Out of the silence, her deep voice thick with tears, Sister Kach would raise her face heavenward and begin to pray, "Oh God. Our God ..." She was radiant. *Our* made me hungry.

Sister Kach invited me into *our* through her presence. Another saint invited me into *our* through his pen.

In Mindanao, Philippines, at the age of 45, missionary Frank Laubach encouraged others to join him in a prayer venture through openly journaling his experiment in practising the presence of God. On January 26, 1930, Laubach wrote: "In defense of my opening my soul and laying it bare to the public gaze in this fashion, I may say that it seems to me that we really seldom do anybody much good excepting as we share the deepest experiences of our souls in this way. It is not the fashion to tell your inmost thoughts, but there are many wrong fashions, and concealment of the best in us is wrong."¹

Countless times I have savoured each of Laubach's journal entries. The pages of this thin book are now creased and discoloured, and the binding is frail. Yet, to this day, Laubach's *our* still makes me hungry.

In the life of a leader, *our* issues a summons to journey transparently (as opposed to only privately) with those whom we lead. What might that journey look like in our day? What would happen if a wave of leaders rose to the Laubach legacy? What would happen if a wave of leaders acknowledged their hunger—their

need for a more intimate prayer life—and invited those they lead into *our* through vulnerably journaling their journeys?

I can envision the under 140-character Twitter updates:

"Searching for a prayer mentor. Ache 2 know God more."

"Starting prayer experiment with 5 minutes of silence to begin my day. Didn't make it past 23 seconds."

"Even when my body is still, my mind is in motion. Long road ahead. Worth the workout."

"Took first 24-hour prayer retreat WITHOUT also preparing a message. Wow. I mean, WOW. Posted journal entries on my blog."

Do you think those we lead might be interested in such a journey? I do. I think *our* will make them hungry.

Our Father In Heaven

Compared to "Lord," "Father" occurs rather infrequently in the Old Testament as a name for God. However, the picture painted by these few references is breathtaking. As *Father*:

God is our Creator who made us and formed us (Deuteronomy 32:6).

God knows us and is our Redeemer (Isaiah 63:16).

God is the Potter and we are the clay, the work of His hands (Isaiah 64:8).

God is our "friend from [our] youth" (Jeremiah 3:4).

God has compassion upon us (Psalm 103:13).

God longs for us to turn from evil and honour Him as our Father (Jeremiah 3:19; Malachi 1:6).

The Messiah would bear the title "Everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6).

This image of God as *Father* was present in the minds of Jesus' Jewish listeners when He taught them to pray. Jesus' "Our Father"



echoed phrases from the *Kaddish D'Rabanan* (Rabbi's Kaddish) and linked one of Jesus' first teachings in the New Testament to one of the last prophetic cries of the Old Testament: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?" (Malachi 2:10). "Our Father," Jesus began, and the Teacher's words immediately centred His listeners' commonly pursued journey of prayer in their commonly held relationship in life—we are all God's children.

Two Greek words are translated as *father* in the NIV. The first, *gennao*, is the famous "begat" of the KJV and makes the vast majority of its appearances in Matthew's genealogical account of Jesus. The second, *pater*, occurs over 400 times in the New Testament and is used to speak of God as Father, physical or spiritual fathers, forefathers, patriarchs, and ancestors.

Jesus could have said, "Our Creator" or "Our Redeemer" or "Our Lord" or "Our Fortress" or "Our Shepherd." But as He considered how to lead His listeners into a life of prayer, Jesus chose to begin His teaching with an emphasis on the fatherhood of God. Why?

Perhaps God's greatness is easier to comprehend than God's nearness. Perhaps because—more than failed forms and misguided methods—our true challenge to advancing in prayer lies deep within our God concept. If we saw God as Jesus saw God—as Father—prayer would be as natural as thinking.

Personally, an atheist substantially enriched my God concept. My earthly father, Louis Robert Britt, was born in 1940 in Jackson, Mississippi, and died in 2001 in McAllen, Texas, on my son's fourth birthday. I miss him more than words can say.

Like old friends, Dad and I would sit together into the wee hours. In those late night talks, I had my first glimpse of the Divine. Not that Dad believed in a god or gods—not at all. But Dad let me know that no question was foolish, no subject was off limits. Nothing shocked him, shamed him, or shut him down—and that is truly godlike.²

"The Greek words translated 'Father in heaven' appear in tandem slightly over a dozen times throughout Scripture with related wording—'heavenly Father' and 'Father who is in heaven'—adding only six more occurrences. I could not find this close pairing of Father + heaven anywhere in the Old Testament. The phrase appears to be unique to the New Testament, unique to the Gospels and, further, unique to the voice of Jesus. In the Bible, only Jesus refers to God as 'Father in heaven.' Why?"

When God interrupted my existence, and shortly after a mentor referred to God as *Our Father*, I thought, *Ah, how wonderful*. As a near, safe, and attentive father, Dad gave me a jump-start into the development of a healthy God concept. Others have not been so fortunate. Perhaps this, too, answers the *why* of Jesus' choice of words. Jesus sets an example for us as leaders to couple a vulnerable viewing of our prayer lives with a reconstructive teaching emphasis on the fatherhood of God.

Our Father In Heaven

At first glance, I viewed this phrase as some sort of GPS address—Father *in heaven*—and wondered, *What a curious pairing of words*. Father is a person. Heaven is a place. Father is warm. Heaven is space. Father is among the closest of earthly relationships, yet this Father is really out of town.

As I studied, though, I became intrigued with the phrase as a title. The Greek words translated "Father in heaven" appear in tandem slightly over a dozen times throughout Scripture with related wording—"heavenly Father" and "Father who is in heaven"—adding only six more occurrences. I could not find this close pairing of Father + heaven anywhere in the Old Testament. The phrase appears to be unique to the New Testament, unique to the Gospels and, further, unique to the voice of Jesus. In the Bible, only Jesus refers to God as "Father in heaven." Why?

I do not know, but the possibilities are fascinating. Perhaps the term was used by generations past, but somehow never made it onto the pages of the Old Testament. Perhaps the phrase arose in the gap between the Old and New Testaments and was familiar to Jesus' hearers. Perhaps the connection was unfamiliar and therefore provided an opportunity for the faithful to take a fresh look at their God.

Whatever the explanation, it seems valuable—as we consider Jesus' example of leading others into a life of prayer—to study the contexts in which Jesus used this term. What might Jesus have been emphasizing by referring to God as "Father in heaven"?

"Father in heaven" and "heavenly Father" occur mostly in the context of instruction, often in connection with an if-then principle. (See sidebar "Father in Heaven If-then Principles.")

The composite of these teachings reveals an attentive, involved God. This is no fickle, yawning, Greek mythical construct that views humankind as a spectator sport for his own amusement. This is "Dad," responsible for and

ALICIA BRITT CHOLE, (WWW.TRUTHPORTRAITS.COM, WWW.LEADERSHIPHII.COM), IS A SPEAKER, WRITER, AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF LEADING AND LEARNING GENERATIONS, AND AUTHOR OF *ANONYMOUS: JESUS' HIDDEN YEARS AND YOURS*, *FINDING AN UNSEEN GOD*, AND *INTIMATE CONVERSATIONS*. SHE RECENTLY OPENED A PRAYER RETREAT HOME IN BRANSON, MISSOURI.



"FATHER IN HEAVEN" IF-THEN PRINCIPLES

By Alicia Britt Chole

- If you let your light shine before men, *then* others will see and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).
- If we love our enemies, *then* we will be sons of our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44,45).
- If we give to be seen, *then* we will have no reward from our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1).
- If we forgive others, *then* our Father in heaven will forgive us (Matthew 6:14; 18:35; Mark 11:25).
- If we do the will of Jesus' Father who is in heaven, *then* we will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21).
- If we acknowledge Jesus before men, *then* Jesus will acknowledge us before His Father in heaven (Matthew 10:32).
- If we disown Jesus before men, *then* Jesus will disown us before His Father in heaven (Matthew 10:33).

- If we do the will of our Father in heaven, *then* we are Jesus' mother, brothers, and sisters (Matthew 12:50).
- If two agree on earth in prayer, *then* the Father in heaven will hear and act (Matthew 18:19).

ADDITIONAL "FATHER IN HEAVEN" ATTRIBUTES:

- He is perfect (Matthew 5:48).
- He feeds the birds of the air and knows what we need (Matthew 6:26,32).
- He revealed Jesus as the Son of God to Peter (Matthew 16:17).
- He knows how to give good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13).
- He watches over little ones closely and does not want any of them lost (Matthew 18:10,14).

responding to His children. This is "Father," calling us to be like Him and disciplining us when we choose against Him. This is "Father in heaven," parenting us with eternity in view.

Whereas "our" takes us from me to we, and "Father" startles us with God's nearness, "Father in heaven" captures God's interaction with us on earth. As Jesus was leading others more deeply into prayer, He selected descriptors that portrayed God as a generous, all-seeing dad who responds with either blessing or discipline to every choice we make. In other words, "Dad" is in the house (and He is not napping).

Though I personally love napping, and though I am a faint shadow of God's strength as a parent, my kids know that the consistent emphasis on choice and consequence in our home is for the salvation of their souls. "Do Daddy and Mommy say yes to help you or to hurt you?" I will ask one of my tearful children.

"Help me," they sputter through their sobs.

To which I reply, "And do Daddy and Mommy say no to help you or to hurt you?"

"To help me," they answer as they snuggle into my arms.

Perhaps Jesus chose "Father in heaven" because its combined emphasis of nearness and oversight, tenderness and justice, is confidence inducing. Why?

Love makes discipline bearable. Discipline makes love believable.

In harmony, love and discipline empower parenting—on earth and from heaven — to take the path of the greatest good as opposed to the path of the least resistance.

"Our Father in heaven."

(Let us pray.)

1. Why do I (really) want to lead others into a deeper life of prayer?
2. How can I personally embrace the Laubach legacy?
3. In what creative venues can I partner with the Holy Spirit's reconstruction of God concepts through an emphasis on God as "Father" and "Father in heaven"?

Notes

1. Brother Lawrence and Frank Laubach, *Practicing His Presence*, ed. Gene Edwards, (Auburn: Christian Books, 1973), 3.
2. Alicia Britt Chole, *Finding an Unseen God: Reflections of a Former Atheist* (Bloomington: Bethany Publishers, 2009), 32.

