

Prayer: the Human Element

The Element of Confrontation
See Numbers 11:4-17 and Mark 15:32-
September 24, 2006

In the movie *The Apostle*, Robert Duvall plays the part of Sonny, a ragged, hot-tempered, womanizing evangelist. Mainly through his own arrogance, Sonny loses his own church and his wife is leaving him for the youth pastor. Angry and broken, Sonny moves back into his mother's house where he paces and prays – or shouts – to God from an upstairs window.

*Somebody, I say somebody, has taken my wife. They stole my church ... I don't want to yell at you but I'm mad at you. I can't **take** it. Give me a sign, Lord. Blow this pain out of me. Lord Jehovah, if you won't give me back my wife, give me peace. Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me. Give me peace ... I'm confused. I'm mad. I love you, Lord, I love you but I am mad. I am mad at **you!** I've always called you "Jesus" and you've always called me "Sonny." What should I do?*

His prayer is so loud that a neighbor calls Sonny's mother to complain about the noise. "That is my son," she explains. "Ever since he was a little bitty boy, sometimes he talks to the Lord and sometimes he yells at the Lord. And tonight he just happens be yelling at him."¹

"Sometimes he talks to God and sometimes he yells at God. Tonight he's yelling at God." Yelling at God? Arguing with God? Doesn't that sound strange, irreverent and entirely inappropriate? Well, maybe not. This morning I want to explore a biblical way of praying that I'm calling the prayer of confrontation. Prayer as confrontation occurs when I bring my questions, doubts, disagreements and even my complaints directly to God. Prayers of confrontation range from "tortured complaint in the face of suffering to outrageous anger in the absence of justice. It sometimes cajoles and bargains with God; at times it challenges and even defies." In the history of the Jewish people this type of prayer – replete with laments, dirges, complaints and arguments – has a long and noble history.²

As we'll see a minute, the Bible is filled with these kinds of confrontational prayers. God not only allows it, he seems to encourage it. When it's done with the right attitude and perspective, God likes this. This tradition reveals a robust, hearty, alive, engaging relationship with God.

¹ From *The Apostle* directed by

² See Anson Laytner's *Arguing with God* in which he says, "The Jewish literary heritage is replete with laments, dirges, complaints and arguments, all protesting God's treatment of His people."

This tradition also represents a unique concept of God. In the Bible God isn't like the Greek gods – distant, indifferent, even hostile and mean, opposed to human happiness (i.e. Prometheus). In the Biblical story God is good and God rules the world with justice. God has also made a covenant with His people, promising, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” God binds himself to specific people and promises to care for them as they promise to obey and honor him. As we'll see, this is basic to this type of prayer. Both parties are held together by a binding, enduring love relationship.

Prayer as confrontation is sometimes called the “law court pattern of prayer” and it contains four basic movements:

- (1) An address is made to God.
- (2) The evidence – God is the judge and the defendant here, so the complaint is made to God and against God at the same time. The evidence depends on God's own standard and character. When things don't seem to line up with God's standard of justice, evidence is brought to and against God.
- (3) A request – i.e. “this is what I want you to do God.”
- (4) A response - God listens. God responds – although the response may be delayed. God agrees with the case or disagrees with the case, but either way, God respects and responds to the process.

Now at this point I hope you're thinking something like: “This is strange and uncomfortable. I would never talk to God this way. Prayer should always be nice and respectful. Who am I to haul God to court?” Excellent points. This is a shocking way to pray, but this type of prayer will also revolutionize your prayer life and your relationship with God. You see, in prayer, God wants us to engage with Him. It's almost as if God is saying, “Talk to me. Engage with me. Respond to me. Anything is better than the silent treatment and the cold shoulder. Argue, rant, rave, stew, disagree, but don't just sit there. Or worse, don't come to me with pious, pretty words that are empty and fake.” Prayer is an intensely personal and passionate conversation with a God who is there; it's an exercise that involves all of you – the real you, not the pretend you, the false you.

Example #1 – Abraham: First, there's Abraham confronting God about God's planned destruction of the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:20-21. But rather than wilt and sulk away, Abraham engages God (verse 22 says that “Abraham remained standing before the Lord) by saying ... (see Genesis 18:23-25). And then Abraham starts negotiating with God. Do you see the elements of the law-court pattern of prayer? Abraham is confronting God as judge and defendant. And God responds to his request: Abraham argues God from 50 to 10 righteous people.

But notice the attitude of Abraham in verse 27 – “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, *though I am nothing but dust and ashes* ...” I don't know if you followed World Cup soccer games this past year, but the complaints about the officiating were at an all-time high. Comments like “the refs are idiots” and “the refs ruined the game” were routine during the World Cup. Then, of course, there's American basketball games in which a guy will clobber an opponent with a vicious forearm shiver, get called

for a foul and then stand with his arms in the air as if to say, “Who me? You’ve got to be kidding! I hardly touched the guy.” But in both sports the confrontation with the officiating stems from the arrogance that says, “I know better than you. My opinion is superior to yours.”

That’s not the attitude behind this type of prayer. Notice what Abraham says as he stands and argues with God, “I am nothing but dust and ashes.” Or “You made me out of dust and you could turn me back to dust – or a tiny grease spot – in the next nanosecond, but I still must ask this question.” Prayer as confrontation involves incredible humility, awe and even a hushed sense of wonder that we’re allowed to approach God like this. It should stun us and break us with wonder. We aren’t equal sparring partners. It’s not the difference between a referee and a midfielder. It’s the difference between the Creator and the created; the Maker and the dust; the Potter and the pot. And yet, I’m invited to come, engage and confront this Living God and Creator.

Example #2 – Moses: Second, let’s look at Moses in Numbers 11:10-17. The story behind this section goes like this: God led his people out of slavery in Egypt and they are wandering – very slowly – to the Promised Land. Moses is responsible for this unruly bunch of bull-headed, whiny, cantankerous people. Before he even started this long journey, God made a promise to Moses, “I will be with you ...I will help you” (Exodus 3:12 and 4:15). But now this massive family camping expedition with a cast of thousands is starting to unravel (see 13:4). The whining is reaching epidemic proportions and Moses tells God, “*Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth?* In other words, this is your problem, God, so why aren’t you taking care of your problem? *Why did you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Did you notice that Moses presents God with the evidence of God’s own promises? Now Moses is asking God to remember to fulfill those promises. Where can I get meat for all these people? ... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you’re going to treat me, put me to death right now.*” In other words, Moses says, “You aren’t coming through on your end of the bargain, God. I can’t handle this. I’m overwhelmed and I’m sinking fast.”

Now here’s the amazing thing: God actually listens to Moses – and God responds. In verses 16-17 God responds like a business consultant, offering some suggestions that will help Moses delegate some of his massive administrative duties. Moses addresses God, presents his complaint to God who is both judge and defendant, Moses makes his requests and God listens and intervenes on Moses’ behalf. The Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier, once said, “It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need that humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously.” In our terminology, God “validates our feelings.” You can call that psychobabble if you want to, but that’s exactly what God does. He did it for Abraham, Moses, David, Hannah – God did it for everyone who called upon His name.

Example #3 – Jeremiah 12:1-2.

Example #4 – The Psalmist: A third example: Psalm 10. This psalm begins with an urgent address to God: “*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*” From there he launches into a presentation of the facts. Verse 2 – “*In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught off guard in the schemes he devises.*” Verse 5 – “*His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at his enemies.*” Verse 10 – “*His victims are crushed, they collapse, they fall under his strength.*” Do you see how the psalmist is marshalling his case to God and against God? Again, did you notice how all this depends on the reality of justice. Then notice how the psalmist makes a request from God: Verse 12 – “*Arise Lord! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless. Why does the wicked man revile God? ... But you, O God, do see trouble and grief ... the victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.*” The psalmist reminds God of God’s own character.

This type of prayer calls us to take others seriously. In our fast-paced, competitive world, there’s a tendency to receive every complaint or expression of hurt as just another instance of victimization and whining. But remember that God receives us, even when we come to confront Him. Can you imagine how this would transform our commitment to justice and compassion in the world? As followers of Jesus, as those who talk to the Living God, we would never read the *New York Times* or *Newsday* or the homepage of AOL the same way. Last week I read the words of Psalm 10 immediately after a read a book review of a book that describes the plight of millions of women – many of them mere children – who are lured into and then trapped in the jaws of the global sex trade. In contemporary terms, we should pray Psalm 10 like this: “Look, God, this global sex trade thing: it isn’t right. It’s a tragedy. My God, look at the children! You’re a God of justice and this doesn’t look like justice. You’re a God of the moral straight line, but this looks so crooked and bent. So, good God in heaven, do something about it. I can’t accept this situation anymore. And I can’t accept because I know who you are – a God of justice for the oppressed, the Father to the fatherless.” Do you see how this gets us involved in our praying, how it increases our compassion and outrage at injustice and oppression? Prayer isn’t just an exercise in private piety or personal holiness. It gets us in touch with the God who is the father to the fatherless, the liberator of the oppressed.

Revolutionizing Your Prayer Life

Confronting God? Arguing with God? I’ve been wrestling with this all week. What does this all mean for us? Most of us have been taught that prayer is respectful and quiet. We fold our hands and close our eyes and think nice thoughts about God and then say pretty words to God. But this is ragged and wild prayer.

The biblical tradition of prayer as confrontation means that we must take our prayer life seriously. Grab on to God, argue with God, flail at God, ask God “Why?” and “When?” and “How long?” and “When will you wake up and do something?” but don’t just come with your pious, respectable, rote prayers that never engage your heart and your pain. In volleyball it’s the difference between a dink shot and a spike. Dink shots are tiny shots

that just barely eke over the net and fall softly on the other side. They score points but that doesn't mean that every point is a dink shot. Sometimes you have to score with a spike shot. Slam the ball back to the other side. Sometimes in the life of prayer God says, "Go ahead and spike it back to me. I don't want an unending litany of dink shots. Slam it to me. I can take it. If you feel uncomfortable, I'll even warm you up with some choice words. Here – try Psalm 7 or Psalm 10 or Psalm 44. Or get mentored by a few of my favorite characters – Moses and Abraham and Jeremiah. You might even change my mind." I'm still shocked by my own words, but based on these Bible passages – and so many more – I'm not sure how else to say it. Yes, we have to be very careful here because God's timing can be so different than ours. God's ways can be so different than ours. God may leave the suffering in place for a greater purpose and to create greater beauty in us and through us. But don't stop engaging God and wrestling with God.

As a side note, can you imagine how this would change the level of honesty and compassion in our small groups?

But more than anything prayers as confrontation tells us something profound and wonderful about God and what we call the Gospel, the good news of what Christ has done for us and in us. We often get the impression that the essence of Christian spirituality is what we do for God or how well we behave for God. So we try hard to be clean, to act nice, to be kinder and less angry. We may serve on a committee or dress up for church or dress down for church. We say a few pious prayers with the right words around our family table or in our small groups. Again, we try to act respectable. We obey and hope that God is pleased.

But the Gospel, the good news about what God has done for us in Christ, turns this on its head. Instead it tells us, "Behold, look, how much the Father loves you! He fought for you. He is a jealous God who wants your heart. He is a passionate God who has fought for you. Now obey because He has set you free." Do you see how much God wants you?

How much did God love us? Look at our Gospel reading from Mark 15. Here Jesus, God the Son, cries out to God the Father, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" or "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a prayer of Jesus, the Lord, the Crucified One, the Risen One, who is crying out his prayer as a confrontation with God the Father. *Father, where are you?* If we accept the Christian story it goes something like this: Jesus was and is God in human flesh, which means that God himself has stepped into our shoes, taking our place, standing in solidarity with us in all of our pain and confusion and even our anger and our feelings of abandonment. God knows all the feelings and pain behind our prayers of confrontation. God doesn't just receive this prayer; God has made this kind of prayer.

This is simply stunning. God is so amazing and awesome and interesting and wonderful and brilliant. Someone has pictured it this way:

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame, but with rage.

'Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?' snapped a young woman. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. 'We endured terror...beatings...torture...death!' In another group an African American boy lowered his collar. 'What about this?' he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. 'Lynched...for no crime but being black!' A lonely and sexually abused 10th grade girl lowered her eyes and said, "Why, God?"

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the suffering he permitted in his world. God was lucky: He lived in heaven where everything was safe and sweet. What did God know of human pain and agony? God leads a sheltered life, they said.

So they selected a group of people who had suffered the most: a tortured Cuban poet, a refugee from Darfur, a hungry crack baby from the projects of south Chicago. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man! 'Let him be born a wandering, poor refugee. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think he's insane. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be abused and tortured. At the last, let him die naked and alone.'

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No-one uttered another word. No-one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.³

The Gospel tells us this: I am a flawed and broken sinner. I have flagrantly violated God's law and I am not righteous based on my own track record. As a matter of fact, based on my track record, I'm on fast-track to hell. Now if I compare myself to everyone else in the world and I hope that God grades on a curve, maybe I'm okay. But God asks me to compare myself not against everyone else but against his standards of utter holiness. And God doesn't grade on a curve: God gives us what we don't deserve or can't earn. God clothes me in the righteousness of Christ. That means I get his track record placed on my life. So I can approach God not with cringing fear and shame; I approach God with confidence and freedom and incredible gratitude.

Do you know that freedom with your heavenly Father this morning?

³ This my revised and updated and condensed version of a short drama known as "The Long Silence." As far as I know, the original author is unknown. I found one version in John Stott's book *The Cross of Christ*.