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CHAPTER 2

*The Revelation
of Prayer:
Our Yearning for God*

O LORD, our Lord,
how awesome is your name through all
the earth!
You have set your majesty above
the heavens!

PSALM 8:2

What Do You Think?

In the space provided write whether you agree or disagree with this statement: *Belief in God changes a person's outlook on life.* Give reasons for your response.

Look what I did, Momma! Before, all Pedro could do was swim around in his fishbowl. So I built an underwater highway in the fishbowl."

Manuel tried to get the fish to swim through the tunnel and down the road. "Hey, Pedro, why don't you swim through the tunnel and down the road?" he would ask over and over again. "That is why I made them for you." But there was no response.

Manuel's mother watched and listened. She looked into his brown eyes and saw how unhappy he was. "Manuel," she finally said, "the problem is you don't speak the same language as the fish." There was a silence. Manuel went back to the bowl on the table and wished he could become a fish.

What parallels can you find between this story and God's relationship with us?

KEY TERMS

covenant of Sinai

Diaspora

Hebrews

hesed

People of God

prophets

revelation

Sacred Tradition

Manuel wished he could communicate with his fish. From our Catholic perspective this story can serve to illustrate the mystery of the love of God for human beings. God created people and invites us to enter into relationship with him. This chapter will address ways that our ancestors, the **Hebrews**, listened to and responded to God's invitation to enter into the covenant relationship with him.

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church,
2566–2567)*

The Universal Call to Prayer

We are in search of God, who calls us to himself in love and kindness. God reveals his presence to us in an intimate relationship. Prayer is an expression of that relationship.

For Reflection

Answer these questions as honestly as you can.

Why pray?

Why seek a deeper relationship with God?

What are you looking for in prayer?

Discuss: In what ways does God reach out to you in prayer?

[T]he living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. CCC, 2567

Christian prayer has its origin in the peoples of the Old Testament. In their unique and uncommon relationship with God lie the roots of our Christian faith, our prayer, our life.

The **Sacred Tradition** of the Catholic Church echoes the wisdom of the past. It helps us understand our present in order to move forward into the future of our faith. It is important to listen to those who went before us, as they have much to teach us about the nature of prayer and the faith-filled life.

From our roots in Hebrew history we discover our identity as the **People of God**. After all, we are made in the image of God—we have a spiritual dimension that only finds completeness in God. Our search for God is written into our human nature. Our search for God is the fulfillment of our humanness. The search is marked with a hunger for God, who calls us to prayer—to the heart of himself where we are transformed and made new.

Prayer

is not asking.
It is a longing
of the soul.

GANDHI



What the Documents Say

God tirelessly calls each person to this mysterious encounter with Himself. Prayer unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation as a reciprocal call between God and man.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2591

For Reflection:

How often do you pray? (Each day? Each week?)

When was the last time you prayed?

What was it that you prayed about?

How have you experienced the presence of God when you prayed? Describe it.

Our Ancestors’ Experience of God through Prayer

Even in the grandeur of perfect surroundings the first human beings were not satisfied. Because they were free to reject God, they separated themselves from him. But God did not abandon us. The Old Testament is the **revelation** of God’s initiative through people like Abraham, Moses, Solomon and the **prophets**, to reconnect, to reestablish a relationship between himself and humankind.

Journal Writing:

Complete the sentence.

“In creation, I have experienced the presence of God . . .”

This relationship was solidified in the **covenant of Sinai** through which God chose the Hebrew people as his own. That covenant relationship is reflected in the people’s obedience, out of their love of God.

Praise the LORD from the heavens;
give praise in the heights.
Praise him, all you angels;
give praise, all you hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
give praise, all shining stars.
Praise him, highest heavens,
you waters above the heavens.
Let them all praise the LORD’s name;
for the LORD commanded and
they were created.

Psalm 148:1–5

Creation

Prayer is the window from which we look to the wonder that God has bestowed on all of creation. In creation we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the truth about God. God has painted a glimpse of himself into the landscape of nature and we gaze upon it with wonder and awe.

The Old Testament reveals to us the origins of our Christian faith in the lives, questions, and experiences of the people of Israel, the Hebrews. The Israelites came to believe, in spite of all the temptations of the cultural influences of the time, in one God who would eventually reveal himself as Yahweh. They would experience a relationship so intimate, so loving and caring, that it would forever change their destiny as a people and a culture.

When we read the psalms we are introduced to the struggle, the joy, and the hope of the people of Israel. We listen and hear about their discovery of God inviting them to himself through creation. These songs give us a clear picture of the prayerful attempts of our ancestors to engage in a conversation with the Creator and deepen their love of God through that communication. Prayer draws us to God.


Abraham

While our hunger for God builds up from the depths of our soul, it is God who reaches to humankind in order to love and connect with us. This is clearly revealed to us in the story of Abraham.

The Old Testament tells us of the extraordinary relationship between God and his people. The God who revealed himself to the Hebrews is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We are inextricably entwined with the faith of our Israelite ancestors. Jesus was a Jew. He lived, learned, taught, suffered, and died within a Jewish context.

..... The Prayer of Faith.....

If we look back into the history of the Israelites we find a people with a deep willingness to do as God willed. Abraham believed that God was present to him always and had a bond with him. Abraham went forth "as the LORD directed him" (Genesis 12:4) as he surrendered to the will of God. Abraham's was a simple faith. It was a faith that would be tested against Abraham's love of his son, Isaac, and would save Isaac because of the love that Abraham had for God.



What Do You Think?

It has been said that prayer is a submission to the will of God. Another word for submission is *surrender*.

What images come to mind when you think of the word *surrender*?

Do these images help you describe your experience of prayer? Why or why not?

Moses

When Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, he had his first encounter with God through a burning bush. This would be a new beginning for the entire Hebrew people. Upon seeing the bush Moses moved closer to it. Whereupon God spoke to him, telling him, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father," he continued, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'" (Exodus 3:5-6).

The covenant at Sinai sealed a special relationship between God and his people. The law became the glue that bound the daily life of the people to God. Adhering to the laws of God was a delight to those who followed them and it became the manner in which they

were to express their love of God. God keeps his promises; and through a devotion to the law and a life lived in obedience to God, the Hebrews found a richness in their life.

..... The Prayer of Intercession

Moses grew to know and trust God as faithful and true. Moses drew strength from this faith and he became the mediator, or intercessor, between God and his people. He was the trusted liaison, or messenger, between the infinite God and the Hebrew people wandering in the desert.

Moses made a total of eight trips up Mount Horeb to bring the concerns of the people to God. "The prayer of Moses responds to the living God's initiative for the salvation of his people" (CCC, 2593).


The Hebrews were on a long, arduous journey to the Promised Land. It would take forty years to accomplish the goal. Imagine following a man who claims to have seen God, a man whose physical appearance changes each time he descends from the mountain where he has met with God.

The Scripture tells us, "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another" (Exodus 33:11). Through it all Moses remained faithful to his mission, his promise to God to deliver his chosen people to the Land of Canaan. Throughout the process, God revealed himself to the people in order to save them, to bring them back to himself in order that they might live life to the fullest.

Our own prayer is often the result of our desire to meet our needs as people. The Old Testament reassures us that God listens to us because he is a God

of love who is deeply concerned with the welfare of his people.

Moses models for us a posture of prayer that is one of both trusting obedience and trusting presentation of the needs of his people to God. The prayer of Moses also foreshadows the great Mediator, Jesus.



What Do You Think?

When would submitting to another's will be wise? Share your reasons for your response.

Would it make any difference whose will it was? Why or why not?

When might the word *submission* have a positive connotation? Why?

David


We are not alone in our spiritual journey. We belong to a community of believers with whom we seek to find a deep and meaningful relationship with God. In this common pursuit the prayer of David “is a faithful adherence to the divine promise and expresses a loving and joyful trust in God, the only King and Lord” (CCC, 2579).

The story of the great King David reflects yet another model of prayer for us. The king prays not only on his own behalf, but also on behalf of the entire people. He is the shepherd king who “prays for his people and prays in their name” (CCC, 2579).

..... The Prayer of the People of God

Faith in God is more than a personal invitation from and a personal response to God. The response also is made within the context of a believing community. It is in that faith community, the community of the People of God, that our faith and our prayer are tested, challenged, and shaped in an honest and meaningful way. The Israelites clearly expressed their belief in this communal dimension of prayer. The Ark of the Covenant and the Temple of Jerusalem witness to the trust that was present among God’s people.

Many people today believe that they can have a relationship with God without the benefit of a church or a faith community. We believe that God calls us to live within the community of the People of God. We grow in our faith within the heart of our tradition, a tradition that reflects the wisdom of people of faith who have made the journey and who serve to act as examples to us of the graced life of the believer.



What Do You Think?

What can other people teach us about spirituality?

Discuss: The spiritual life includes not only my relationship with God, but also my relationship with others.

Elijah

After the rule of David and the building of the Temple of Jerusalem by Solomon, his son, the Temple became a place for education in prayer and faith in the Lord. Whether in the form of pilgrimages, feasts and sacrifices, or evening offerings—all of which were signs of the holiness of God—the Hebrew people found a sacred presence in these rituals. They became a manner in which to come to worship their God more fully. To the people of that day, these were all forms of prayer. The sacred rituals that the People of God used were tools to help them understand the Awesome Mystery on which they had come to love and rely.

..... The Prayer of Conversion

Unfortunately, as in our experience today, the living of their faith was often reduced to ritual action—to the written prescriptions and externals of the ceremonies. Religion, for many, became little more than following a set of rules and regulations rather than a genuine response to the love of God in daily living. Eventually, too many of the Israelites became void of an inner spiritual life. It was during these times that the prophets, the spokespersons for God, called the People of God back to the heart of the covenant, to the love of God and one another. Often it was

the role of the prophet to stand alone, trumpeting the voice of God to “return to the LORD” (Hosea 14:3).

The voice of the prophet was constant and unwavering. It was a clear reminder of the covenant God made with the people—a covenant that God would always remain faithful in his love for his people. The Hebrews have a word that closely describes this love of God, *hesed*. The word *hesed* means “love,” “mercy,” or “steadfast kindness.” The prophet challenged and invited the people to return to the relationship with God. It was a call to a conversion of the heart.

What Do You Think?

Describe your faith journey by answering these questions.

Has religion ever become nothing more than following a set of rules for you?

Have you ever found yourself “going through the motions” with your faith?

How have you or can you overcome this?

The Psalmist

The Book of Psalms is a beautiful collection of songs of prayer used in the Hebrew community in various settings of worship. It is considered the “masterwork of prayer” in the Old Testament. The psalms were the prayers that flowed from the heart of the People of God. They expressed their deepest longings, their love and praise, their sorrow and emptiness. They were rooted in the Israelite faith in the presence of God in their lives.

The psalms began to be written during the **Diaspora**, a time when the Hebrew people were broken up and scattered. This time of history helped to shape a tremendously powerful and beautiful spirituality among the Hebrew people. They longed for a homeland and a sacred place since the Temple had been destroyed. In the midst of this struggle, the Hebrew people discovered a profound dependence on and intimacy with God.

..... The Prayer of Assembly

The psalms grow out of this struggle, this desire to rely on the love and promise that God had made to his people. They reflect the spiritual journey of the Hebrew people in a way nothing else does.

The psalms are powerful prayers for us today. Praying them expresses the struggles and joys of our own spiritual journey. They challenge us to root our lives in our faith. Coming to know and respond to God in love is what we were created to do. Our identity is in God, who made us in his image.

The psalms can be hymns of praise and thanks, prayers, cries of hope or lamentations. They still express the simplicity and the spontaneity of prayer. We pray

from our hearts what we experience in our lives. Whether flowing from joy or pain, frustration or anger, hope or anxiousness, fear or desire, the psalms express our trust in God, who accepts us in our good times and our bad times.

We believe that God created us out of love and continues to reach out to us in that love. In prayer we bring to God who we are—with no disguise or falseness. If we are sad, angry, happy, or joyous; if we are anxious and preoccupied with other things in our life, that is the time when God accepts and embraces us.

A careful praying of the psalms is at the heart of our prayer as Christians as it is for Jews. Our struggle to come to know God through our prayer life grows out of the same soil as our ancestors.



Moses, statue by Michelangelo (1475–1564).

Prayer



God of wonder and grace,
enter into my heart and help me
to see your face.

My ancestors carved a path
for me to know you;
help me find the wisdom
in their journey.

Give me the desire
to know you more fully.

I am your child,
and you are my God.

Grant that I might become
the person that you created.
Help me to realize the wonder
that you created in me,
and teach me to love you
in all that I do.

Amen.

REVIEW

IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

covenant of Sinai—the covenant between God and the people of Israel. By the covenant of Sinai the Israelites became the special people of Yahweh (see Exodus 19).

Diaspora—the Jewish communities that settled outside Palestine that began in the eighth century B.C.

Hebrews—the name given to the Israelites by non-Israelites

hesed—a Hebrew word attributed to God, meaning “all merciful, loving, and unconditional”

People of God—a term used to signify the people of the covenant

prophet—a person sent by God to clearly speak out and call people back to living their covenant relationship with God and one another

revelation—God making himself known to us

Sacred Tradition—the living transmission accomplished in the Holy Spirit, by the Church. “[T]he Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” (CCC, 78).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Old Testament story of God's people is the story of a people of prayer. In this chapter we learned:

1. God invites each person to a mysterious encounter with himself. This encounter is known as prayer.
2. Prayer unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation as a reciprocal call between God and man.
3. The prayer of Abraham is a prayer of faith. The prayer of Moses is an example of the prayer of intercession.
4. The prayer of the People of God flourished during the time of the kings and prophets. King David prays for his people and in their name. The prayer of the prophet Elijah is the prayer of conversion, calling the People of God back to the love of God.
5. The psalms are the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament. They are also an essential dimension of Christian prayer.

EXPLORING OUR CATHOLIC FAITH

1. Listening to God's Word

Prayerfully read Psalm 118 (a praise psalm), Psalm 107 (a psalm of thanksgiving), Psalm 3, 4, or 5 (a psalm of lament), and Psalm 11, 16, or 23 (a psalm of trust). Reflect on your own needs and desires of God at this moment of your life. Then compose your own psalm in your journal.

2. Understanding the Teachings of the Catholic Church

The *Catechism* teaches, "In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response" (CCC, 2567). Discuss the meaning and implications of this teaching.

3. Reflecting on Our Catholic Faith

Saint Ambrose shares this insight about the psalms with us: "Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, praise of God, the assembly's homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church, a confession of faith in song." What is the meaning of these thoughts for your life? Write your thoughts in your journal.

4. Living Our Catholic Faith

The prayer of Moses is an example of intercessory prayer. His prayer flowed from his trust in the faithfulness of God and his understanding of and compassion for his people. What are the needs and struggles of the people you know or know about? Write and pray a prayer of intercession, trusting in God's faithfulness.