

A lit candle on a wooden surface with a blue prayer cord in the foreground. The candle is on the left, and the prayer cord is in the center and right. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

USING THE JESUS PRAYER

STEPS TO A SIMPLER
CHRISTIAN LIFE

**JOHN
TWISLETON**

FOREWORD BY
THE RT REVD MARTIN WARNER,
BISHOP OF CHICHESTER

**USING THE
JESUS
PRAYER**

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Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 1 84101 778 5

First published 2014

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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Cover photo: © Heather Knight

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Foreword

The recurring word in John Twisleton's attractive introduction to the Jesus Prayer is 'simple'. In a culture that demands of us so much choice and such a rapid pace of change, the offer of something simple is extremely welcome, and this is particularly true in the case of exploring faith in Jesus Christ and the experience of prayer.

The vast majority of people in Britain today have little or no direct experience of Christianity, but we are increasingly aware of living in a multiracial society in which the practice of religion is an integral part of the life of Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. Their practice of prayer and worship is a core element of religious education in our schools, raising the question of what prayer is and how it is done.

The question of prayer is also raised for us in other circumstances of our personal and national life. At moments of bereavement and of celebration we look for the words and actions of prayer that can adequately express our most profound emotions.

The Jesus Prayer presents us with an experience of Christian prayer that enfolds, and is greater than, the preoccupations and fashions of our own day. It invites us into a rhythm of encounter with God that has been made smooth by centuries of use. Its simplicity transcends the barriers of language and culture, and is attuned to the spirituality of a person of any age or capacity.

As a pastor and theologian, John Twisleton has been

prompted to make available for us this example of Christian prayer as one that's well suited to the needs of our time. Simplicity is the door to an immediate and authentic experience of the God whom Christians seek to know more fully. In a 24/7 age that never rests, this is an any-time, any-place prayer for any person.

+Martin Cicestr

Introduction

‘I’ve found it!’ Archimedes is supposed to have shouted—‘Eureka!’—as he jumped out of the bath with the solution to the king’s challenge to find out whether his gold crown was adulterated by silver. In the bath, Archimedes had noticed water flowing out as his body sank down, and concluded that the volume of water displaced equalled the volume of his body immersed in the water. This meant that he’d found a way to measure the density of the crown and compare it with a bar of pure gold.

My own ‘eureka moments’ have been few and far between but they’ve defined and simplified my life. This book flows from one of them—the discovery of the Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It was a less dramatic ‘eureka’ than my call to priesthood or marriage to my wife Anne, since I’d been aware of the Jesus Prayer for 30 years before it surfaced as the simplification to Christian life that I now find it to be. Nevertheless I feel impelled to write of it as the simplifier it has become to me and could become to you.

I have come to believe that there is nothing new in Christianity, just the need to enter the day-by-day newness of Jesus. In the following pages I look at how that newness has refreshed me through reciting ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ so as to realise in my life the biblical injunction to pray at all times. The Jesus Prayer is inhabited by Jesus, who is an effective reminder that God is love and has mercy on us frail mortals. It is a prayer

discipline that states the simple good news of Christianity, provides Holy Spirit empowerment to bypass distracted minds, links worship with life, and resonates with the faith and prayer of the church through the ages.

The book starts by reflecting on the good news intrinsic to the Jesus Prayer. It goes on to show how the spiritual discipline of continuously saying it, which is found in Orthodox Christianity, builds from its biblical base. We then change gear to look at how the simplification of anxiety and mental distraction that many people seek in Buddhist-type ‘mindfulness’ exercises can be found in the Jesus Prayer as a ‘God-given mantra’. *Using the Jesus Prayer* concludes with practical advice about saying the Jesus Prayer and about how it helps in relating worship to life and in building up the integrity of Christian believers.

Archimedes helped the king purify his gold through his ‘eureka moment’. I believe the Jesus Prayer to be a gift and task accomplishing spiritual purification. Its growing use is part of the Holy Spirit’s unpacking in our day of the solid riches of Orthodoxy, to help ground the more fluid Catholic and Reformed traditions that often struggle to stand their ground and make disciples.

As an Anglican, I am grateful for Catholic, Reformed and Orthodox traditions, in all of which I trace the golden thread of devotion to the name of Jesus. It is that devotion I would like to commend through invitation to welcome the gift and task of the Jesus Prayer.

The sun, passing over the earth, produces daylight; the holy and worshipful Name of the Lord Jesus, constantly shining in the mind, produces a measureless number of sun-like thoughts.

HESYCHIUS OF JERUSALEM¹

CHAPTER 1

A simple discovery

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God

Say to yourself very often about everything that happens, 'God loves me! What joy!' And reply boldly, 'And I truly love him too!' then go quite simply about all that you have to do and do not philosophise any more. For these two phrases are beyond all thought and do more for us than any thought could do; they are all sufficing.²

That advice from Abbé Henri de Tourville (1842–1903) gives a simple summary of the Christian religion: no need to philosophise, just dwell in God's love and go about all that you have to do, for this truth beyond all thought is all sufficing. I have spent my life calling myself and others back again and again to that advice.

I write mindful of Colin, who died in good heart this morning after such a reminder through confession, anointing and Eucharist. As priest in a country parish, my whole ministry is one of reminder, not least to myself, that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16). It is that reality that surrounds us from

cradle to grave, and only by keeping alert to it can we live to the full. As Colin accepted absolution and communion, I was in no doubt that he was embracing through these sacraments the love of the one we cannot see, into whose presence he passed shortly afterwards. I was privileged to witness a final surrender, acting out those words of de Tourville: 'God loves me! What joy! And I truly love him too!' Christianity's so simple—even if holding ourselves to it can be far from simple because of God's invisibility and the things we suffer that could be read as pointing against the reality of his love.

I sped to Colin's house this morning from my prayers, which now include 30 minutes' recitation of the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' That prayer still echoes within me as I sit down at the computer to start this book. Indeed, I would not be writing unless that prayer were always with me, holding me to God's love with all of my heart, as the discovery it has continued to be over the last six years of my life. As Bishop Kallistos Ware writes:

Part of the distinctive value of the Jesus Prayer lies precisely in the fact that, because of its radical simplicity, it can be prayed in conditions of distraction when more complex forms of prayer are impossible. It is especially helpful in moments of tension and grave anxiety. The 'free' use of the Jesus Prayer enables us to bridge the gap between our explicit 'times of prayer'—whether at church services or alone in our own room—and the normal activities of daily life.³

I had known of the Jesus Prayer for 30 years before I welcomed it as a gift and a task to help us 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17). When I first heard of it, I had

experienced renewal in the Holy Spirit, as I have described in my earlier book, *Meet Jesus*.⁴ The capacity for praying in tongues to help us ‘pray in the Spirit at all times’ (Ephesians 6:18) is familiar to me, and over the years I have related this gift to the teaching and practice of the church through the ages, not least to that of the Orthodox anthology known as *The Philokalia*, which advises on prayer of the heart.⁵ Both the Jesus Prayer and prayer in tongues serve to bypass mental distraction and help to simplify Christian life and devotion, and later on in this book I will be returning to the way they can relate to the enrichment of both practices. As a priest leading worship, attending to people’s joys and sorrows and the stresses and strains of church administration, I have found the Jesus Prayer an invaluable aid. This is because of the simple message it holds before me that God loves me and all that is, minute by minute, day by day and for all eternity.

In this chapter and the next, I want to examine the biblical construction of the two parts of the Jesus Prayer before moving on to draw wisdom from its use throughout the Christian centuries, to see how it helps relate worship to life and build the integrity of Christian believers.

GOD LOVES US

As I prepared Colin to go to God in old age and infirmity, it seemed to me that these words of the apostle Paul had a particular resonance: ‘If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you’ (Romans 8:11). Though his mortal body was fast deteriorating, Colin’s inner life was well fortified, so I imagined his passing as being a journey into a new realm

where that life would burst into a further blossoming at our prayer. God who'd given Colin life had also given him *his own life*. In welcoming that eternal life in word and sacrament into ourselves, as Colin did, throughout our earthly lifetime, our 'inside selves' or souls are made capable of immortality. Almost my last words to Colin were 'The body of Our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.'⁶ These words left him, by his own admittance, in good heart and ready to pass to the unveiled love of God.

*O God, unseen yet ever near, thy presence may we feel;
and thus inspired with holy fear, before thine altar kneel.*

*We come, obedient to thy word, to feast on heav'nly food;
our meat the body of the Lord, our drink his precious blood.*

*Thus may we all thy word obey, for we, O God, are thine;
and go rejoicing on our way, renewed with strength divine.⁷*

Edward Osler's Communion hymn captures the obedience and empowerment of the Eucharist, that greatest sacrament or sign of God's love, bringing us his life, making us more fully his, strengthening us to 'go rejoicing on our way' through life and death.

God loves us: he is 'unseen but ever near'. Just as the air around is invisible but is known when the wind blows, so the love of God announces itself in a prayer, a word of scripture or a sip of wine. Above all, that love shows itself in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who is the sign above all signs that scripture points to and the sacraments reveal.

People sometimes complain at the idea of a loving God. They read signs of futility and decay in the world around them rather than the goodness, beauty and truth that reflect the Creator. It is one of the mysteries of life that some are blinded to a loving God, while others are impatient with unbelievers, like Paul, who wrote, 'Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse' (Romans 1:20). When you catch sight of the love of God, it's as if the world lights up with his glory and even the dark spaces gain meaning. The supreme sign of his love is that he did not keep himself aloof from our dark spaces but, rather, came to enter them and die as one of us. The eye of faith recognises that it can therefore never be said of the God and Father of Jesus that he expects anything of us that he is not prepared to go through himself. As Isaiah's 'Song of the Lord's Gracious Deeds', read at Anglican Evening Prayer in Passiontide, expresses it:

*Who is this that comes from Edom,
coming from Bozrah, his garments stained crimson?*

*Who is this in glorious apparel,
marching in the greatness of his strength?*

*'It is I, who announce that right has won the day,
it is I' says the Lord, 'for I am mighty to save.'*

*'Why are your robes all red, O Lord,
and your garments like theirs who tread the winepress?'*

*'I have trodden the winepress alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me.'*

*I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praises of the Most High;*

*all that God has done for us in his mercy,
by his many acts of love.*

*For God said, 'Surely, they are my people,
my children who will not deal falsely,'
and he became their Saviour in all their distress.*

*So God redeemed them by his love and pity;
He lifted them up and carried them
through all the days of old.*

ISAIAH 63:1-3A, 7-9⁸

That awesome picture of the Saviour in crimson garments, treading the winepress, was composed centuries before Jesus suffered. Just as creation opens up God's glory to the eye of faith, so the Old Testament prophet Isaiah informs the same eye of faith about the immensity of God's love that acts on our behalf with love and pity, to redeem us from our sins and carry us forward into his possibilities. By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is revealed as the greatest sign of God's love, foretold by the biblical prophets, present in the church's preaching and sacraments and destined to bring all things together.

In the early years of persecution, when a Christian met a stranger on the road, he sometimes drew one arc of a simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both believers knew they were in safe company. The early

Christians used the secret sign of the fish because the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, was an acronym for 'Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour', the earliest creed and the shortest statement of Christian faith. The Jesus Prayer is a short expansion of that personal creed, which is expressed by Paul, for example, when he says, 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20b).

'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God' implies that the historical figure of Jesus is the universal Lord and Son of God. Behind that statement is the implication that the invisible God has, in one human life at one time and place, made himself visible, supremely upon the cross, showing us his love to be witnessed to every generation. God who made all and loves all desires to claim all, starting with the human race made in his image. The first clause of the Jesus Prayer affirms the good news that Jesus brings to our lives, news that we come from God, we belong to God and we go to God. 'The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms' (Deuteronomy 33:27, NIV).

'How happy God is in loving us!' writes Abbé de Tourville. 'Like parents who adore their children. It is really just like that and it is *grand*, and just what we should expect of God. It is also necessary for us, poor little creatures that we are. Praise God!'⁹

THE NAME OF JESUS

The Hebrews of the Old Testament saw the names given to people and things not as a sort of 'add-on' but as their basic constituent. Several stories, like that of Jacob and the angel (Genesis 32:29), show a resistance to revealing names, since that knowledge would give the enquirer control over

the one in question. The name of God is particularly opaque and awesome, as is indicated in the conversation recorded in Exodus between Moses and God:

Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."' (Exodus 3:13–14)

This reticence makes his revelation as the God and Father of Jesus Christ quite extraordinary. 'I am who I am' could be interpreted as 'I will be who I will be.' God is above any being since he is the ground of all being. The idea that God would take a human name was and is offensive to the Jewish people, as well as to Muslims. That offence, true to the spirit of Exodus 3, is shown in this Gospel altercation, where Jesus is reported as identifying himself with God's majestic 'I am': 'Jesus said to [the Jews], "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him' (John 8:58–59a).

In Christian understanding, the revelation of God to Moses is not contradicted but is deepened by God's coming to walk upon earth in the person of Jesus Christ. The choice of the name 'Jesus' hints at his succession to Moses, since it is the Greek form of 'Joshua', the name of Moses' successor as Israel's leader, meaning 'God saves'. This understanding of Jesus' coming, life, death and resurrection as having saving significance for us all is there throughout the New Testament. For example, Matthew records an angel appearing to settle Joseph's anxiety about Mary's unexpected pregnancy and saying, 'The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:20b–21).

Repetition of the name of Jesus has unique spiritual power. Here is 'the name that is above every name' because God 'highly exalted' Jesus (Philippians 2:9). If using any name brings a particular person to mind, how much more the name of the one offered in sacrifice for our sins and exalted in his resurrection and ascension to heaven? If God is in all things, how much will he be in the name he chose to bear as our Saviour, of whom scripture says, 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12)? Even before his crucifixion, Jesus' disciples ministered healing and deliverance in their master's name, as recorded in the return of the 70 he commissioned for that purpose: 'The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"' (Luke 10:17).

The phrase 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God' is first used by Peter at the centre and turning point of Matthew's Gospel:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 16:13–17)

Peter, the very first to name Jesus as Son of God, is empowered at Pentecost to minister in that name. After

invoking the name of Jesus over a lame man, he sees the man healed and 'walking and leaping and praising God' (Acts 3:8b), an image of freedom in the Spirit that captures for ages to come the spiritual power in the name of Jesus.

When I recite the Jesus Prayer, I am aware of the power that lies in the name of Jesus, especially as it engages with my base thoughts and desires. The prayer helps us achieve the aspiration of Colossians 3:17: 'Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' The continuous recitation of the Jesus Prayer is a counter to all the base aspirations in me. It is a form of spiritual warfare, as vividly described by the sixth-century Saint John of the Ladder, who makes this injunction: 'Flog the foes with the name of Jesus; for there is no stronger weapon against them either in heaven or on earth.'¹⁰

The power there is in reciting the holy name in the Jesus Prayer is nothing magical but, as scripture indicates, is linked to trusting the word of God and the Holy Spirit. We take Jesus at his word when he says, 'Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you' (John 16:23), mindful that 'no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12:3). It is the power of the truth, no less, since Christian prayer is inseparable from Christian belief, at the centre of which lies the divinity of Christ. To pray 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God...' is to affirm something revealed from God, nothing we could ourselves make up, and the joyful freedom associated with this prayer is the fruit of Christ's promise: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:31-32).

A SIMPLE DISCOVERY

'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,' I repeated on the rowing machine. Time in the gym helps get me out of my mind into my body, and that was especially welcome as I have lacked exercise today. I have been sitting around—at prayer, with the family or the computer, the school head, a bereaved family, home communicants and a troubled parent, as well as putting my mind to celebrating the Eucharist, burying cremated remains and finishing the weekly news sheet. Gym time helps our bodily well-being. It can also be deep thinking time, though this can turn into anxious mental preoccupation, which is why I think many people wear headphones to engage their minds as they exercise their bodies. No headphones today, I thought, but a conscious coming back into the Lord's presence. The Jesus Prayer took something of an act of will at first (though it does flow on unconsciously, as I will explain later) but the holy name of Jesus began to centre and simplify my being. My accent today was on the first phrase, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God', as I repeated the prayer and allowed the name of Jesus to open me to the love of God, which casts out anxiety and useless preoccupation.

There are many ways of praying, and the Jesus Prayer is but one. Over the years, I have moved between reading set prayers, silent attention, singing hymns or choruses, praying or singing in the Spirit to complement the divine offices of morning, midday, evening and night prayer, which are the staple of a priest. As I have welcomed the Jesus Prayer, it has not been to the exclusion of these forms or of the day-by-day Eucharist, but as a gift and task that flows between them and

into my relationships, work and recreation. As I recovered this prayer in the gym, it flowed with the rowing movement, just as its phrasing fits with the natural rhythm of breathing in and out (as I shall explain later). As the prayer centred me, I became aware again of God's love present alongside me in Jesus, of a dispelling of negative preoccupation and an outward focus upon all those exercising around me. The Lord used my recovered discipline of continuous recitation to turn me out of myself in loving intercession towards my neighbours. This was expressed later, in some friendly greetings and one conversation with a young man who was intrigued about why some of his friends had started attending a neighbouring church that was full of young people.

'God-incidences' such as these often follow prayer of whatever kind. A standard definition of prayer is that it 'raises heart and mind to God'. In doing so, it lifts us from self-preoccupation into God's preoccupation, placing us in situations where we feel we are very much in the right time and place. This is the discovery I need day by day, hour by hour, wherever I am—at the gym or at church—the repeated discovery that I am living in the love of God.

This simple discovery is at the heart of Christian motivation. As Bishop Kallistos writes:

Concentrate your whole self, all your ardour and devotion, upon the person of the Saviour. Feel his presence. Speak to him with love. If your attention wanders, as undoubtedly it will, do not be discouraged; gently, without exasperation or inner anger, bring it back. If it wanders again and again, then again and yet again bring it back. Return to the centre—to the living and personal centre, Jesus Christ. Look on the Invocation not so much as prayer emptied of thoughts, but as prayer filled with the Beloved.

*Let it be, in the richest sense of the word, a prayer of affection—although not of a self-induced emotional excitement. For while the Jesus Prayer is certainly far more than ‘affective’ prayer in the technical Western sense, it is with our loving affection that we do right to begin.*¹¹

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In a hectic world, we so often struggle to find ways of growing in faith and, especially, deepening our experience of prayer. While many have been inspired by documentaries about contemplative prayer and monastic life, it remains a challenge to sustain disciplines of prayer and worship in the busyness of everyday life.

The Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodoxy, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner', offers a simple yet profound way of developing such discipline. Thoroughly biblical, carried forward by the faith of the Church through the centuries, it stands as a unique gift and a task for us. In this book on the Jesus Prayer, its succinct summary of faith and its capacity to empower, John Twisleton gives practical guidance on how to use it, as well as exploring the simplicity of life it offers.

John Twisleton is Rector of St Giles, Horsted Keynes in Chichester Diocese, where he also led the diocesan mission and renewal team for eight years. He has also worked as an Area Missioner in London Diocese and as principal of an ordination training centre in Guyana. He has written on topics including baptism, confession, priesthood, prayer and healing, and he broadcasts on Premier Radio.

Simplicity is what makes John Twisleton's presentation of the Jesus Prayer so attractive. In a 24/7 age that never rests, this is an 'any time, any place' prayer for any person.

The Right Revd Martin Warner, Bishop of Chichester



978-1-84101-778-5
UK £6.99



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