

ORIGEN ON PRAYER

By Tye Rambo

Introduction

Prayer is a spiritual discipline that Christians have practiced since the inception of their faith. The Lord Jesus Christ taught his disciples that when they pray they were to pray in this way:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9-13).

Jesus was not only teaching the disciples how to pray, but just two verses earlier he states, “And when you pray... (Matthew 6:7),” indicating that they were also expected to pray. Additionally, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, taught the Thessalonian church to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). These instructions indicate that prayer was to be a part of early Christian life and that it was to be a regular occurrence. Even so, there were some within the church who claimed to be Christians that had been persuaded to believe that prayer was unnecessary.

In the early third century, there were heretics¹ who had risen up and espoused the idea that prayer was futile and they were able to gain adherents within the church. At the request of a

¹The heretics mentioned here could be referring to the followers of Prodicus who are mentioned by Clement in *The Stromata*, 7.7: “I recollect the doctrines about there being no necessity to pray, introduced by certain of the heterodox, that is, the followers of the heresy of Prodicus.” Other heretical sects like the Docetae, Ascodrutae, Archontici, and Marcionitae are also possibilities. Generally, it is Gnosticism that Origen is dealing with. See Clement Of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 7.7, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, And Clement Of Alexandria (Entire)*, Ante-Nicene

man named Ambrosius and woman named Tatiana,² Origen of Alexandria³ wrote the treatise entitled *Περί Ευχης* or *On Prayer*⁴ in order to defend the necessity of prayer against those within church who had been convinced by the false teachings of the heretics. While it was written as a defense of prayer, it was also intended to equip and teach the early church about the discipline of prayer. The treatise is basically broken into two parts as it deals with the subject. The first part addresses the question of prayer in general, while the second part is an extended commentary on the Lord's Prayer taken verse by verse. Thus, this paper will focus on the first part of *On Prayer* and its importance as a spiritual discipline in the Christian life. It will be shown that, for Origen, prayer was intended to be more than a means of receiving material

Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 534. Cf. Eric George Jay, ed. and trans in *Origen's Treatise On Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1954), 93.

²Ambrosius was one of Origen's converts from Gnosticism. He was a rich man who became Origen's patron and supplied Origen's stenographers and copyists. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 6.18, trans. by Paul L. Maier in *The Church History* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), 200-201. The identity of Tatiana is not as clear. It has been suggested that she was Ambrosius' wife. However, Ambrosius' wife is called Marcella in *The Epistle To Africanus*. It has also been proposed that Tatiana is a second name while others have concluded that she is Ambrosius' sister. See Origen, *A Letter From Origen To Africanus*, 15, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First And Second*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 392. Cf. Jay, *On Prayer*, 81.

³Origen Adamantios was born in Alexandria about A.D. 185 to what appear to be Christian parents. He was a student of the scriptures having been educated as a Christian at an early age. At the age of eighteen, he was appointed to the task of giving catechetical direction for the Alexandrian church of which Theology crowned the list of subjects. He had a wide range of knowledge in subjects such as philosophy, geometry, physiology and astronomy. He eventually died in Tyre in A.D. 253 but not before writing an immense amount of material. His critical texts, sermons, commentaries, and various other apologetic and doctrinal treatises contribute greatly to the discussion of second and third century Christianity. For a more extensive overview of Origen's life including his doctrinal and philosophical tendencies see the main authority Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 6.1-39 and Jay, *On Prayer*, 47-75 and Charles Bigg, *The Christian Platonists Of Alexandria: The 1886 Bampton Lectures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 151-279.

⁴Origen's treatise on prayer was likely written somewhere between A.D. 231-250. In *On Prayer*, 23.4, Origen writes, "We have discussed these points (i.e. points connected with Genesis 3: 8-9) at greater length in our examination of the contents of the Book of Genesis." There were twelve or thirteen books of the *Commentary On Genesis* and Origen only proceeded as far as Genesis 5.1. According to Jerome, the thirteenth book contained a discussion of Genesis 4:15. Eusebius states that only the first eight books of the *Commentary On Genesis* were written before Origen left Alexandria. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 6.24. It is probable then that Genesis 3:8-9 was discussed in a later book than the eighth, which would justify dating *On Prayer* after Origen moved to Caesarea in A.D. 231 but before the death of Ambrosius around A.D. 250. For a further discussion of the dating of *On Prayer* see Jay, *On Prayer*, 72.

benefit. It is the contemplation of God where spiritual benefits are conferred upon those praying just as is upon those who are being prayed for.

The Contemplation Of God's Transcendence

Origen begins his treatise on prayer by contemplating the God of the universe who enables man to grasp what is beyond his natural capability. He asserts that man is rational and mortal so they are limited in what they can know. On the other hand, God's ways are superhuman and they far surpass perishable nature. Only by his grace, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, is man able to know him or his will. Origen cites the Wisdom of Solomon, which says, "For what man shall know the counsel of God? Or who shall conceive what the Lord willeth? Hardly do we divine the things that are on earth. But the things that are in the heavens, who ever traced out (Wisdom of Solomon 9:13,16)?" Origen also references Psalm 104:24 where David speaks of God making all things in his wisdom. This wisdom, by which all things are fashioned, is impossible for human nature to know because of its corruptibility. However, what is impossible becomes possible through the Lord Jesus Christ who God made our wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). Appropriately, Origen states, "Who would not answer that it is impossible for man to search out the things in heaven? Nevertheless this, impossible though it is, becomes possible by the abundant grace of God."⁵ Thus, as it relates to prayer, man does not know how he ought to pray or what he ought to pray in and of himself. What he needs is revelation from God through the words of Jesus Christ, in scripture, to pray accurately.⁶

⁵Origen, *On Prayer*, 1.1, ed. and trans. by Eric George Jay in *Origen's Treatise On Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1954), 81 and 93. This is also the translation I used.

⁶Origen, *On Prayer*, 2.1-2.

Furthermore, Origen asserts that just as no man knows the things of a man save the spirit of man that is in him, so the things of God are not known but by the Spirit of God. He cites 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 which says, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.” Therefore, the Holy Spirit teaches man what to say in prayer, not man. When man does not know how to pray as he ought, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for those who are more than conquerors⁷ with groanings that cannot be uttered and are according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27). Thus, Origen claims:

“The Spirit that cries in the hearts of the blessed, Abba Father, knowing in his anxious care that the groans uttered in the earthly tabernacle are calculated to weigh down those who have fallen or transgressed, maketh intercession for us to God with groanings which cannot be uttered.”⁸

It was also one of Jesus’ disciples that in Luke 11:1 asked to be taught how to pray just as John had taught his disciples. Origen explains that the disciple who requested to be taught how to pray was admitting his own weakness in prayer. He knew that he was incapable of praying in the manner in which men ought to pray and so he needed help from Holy Spirit.⁹

⁷Origen claims that when Paul says we are “more than conquerors,” he is stating that the spirit more than makes intercession for those who are more than conquerors. For those who are simply conquerors, he simply makes intercession. Origen plays upon the meaning of *υπερεντυγχανει*. The prefix *υπερ* may add the meaning “on behalf of” which seems to be the case for Paul. Origen sees it as meaning “over” as in overdo, giving the spirit’s intercession intensifying force. Origen gives a description of his method for interpreting Scripture in *De Principiis*. He claims that Scripture has a threefold meaning: literal, moral, and mystical or spiritual. Although the mystical or spiritual (allegorical) meaning is in Origen’s eyes the most important (one can see this when he gives spiritual meaning to the material benefits gained in the instances of effective prayers mentioned in 13.2), this issue with the phrase “more than conquerors” shows that he does at times seek to employ the literal meaning of the text. For a further discussion on Origen’s translational tendencies see Origen, *De Principiis*, 4.2-3 trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First And Second*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 349-367. Cf. Jay, *On Prayer*, 61-71, 85 and Bigg, *Christian Platonists*, 72-189.

⁸Origen, *On Prayer*, 2.3.

⁹Ibid., 2.4.

Therefore, as Origen approaches the difficult task of discussing prayer he admits his need for the Father to shed light upon the subject, the teaching of the first-begotten word, and the operation of the spirit if he is to speak worthily of such a heavy matter.¹⁰ In all of this, the reader gets an opportunity to see Origen himself pray¹¹ and contemplate the God of the universe, who in his transcendence, graces man with the capacity for prayer.

The Contemplation God Through The Defense of Prayer

Origen begins his discussion of prayer by shedding light on the meaning of εὐχῆ and προσευχῆ in scripture. The controversy over the necessity of prayer had evidently included the discussion of the meaning of these two words and the heretics had asserted that they meant “to vow” not “to pray,” like simple Christians thought.¹² Origen admits that the word εὐχῆ sometimes means “to vow.” He cites Genesis 28: 20-14 which says:

“And Jacob vowed a vow (ἠυξῆτο εὐχῆν), saying, If the Lord God be with me, and keep me in this way that I go, and give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, and lead me back to my father’s house in safety, then shall the Lord be my God: and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God’s house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”¹³

Here Jacob is seen to promise with a vow (εὐχῆ) to do certain things if he obtains certain other things from God. Origen also cites other passages throughout scripture that use the word εὐχῆ

¹⁰Origen, *On Prayer*, 2.6.

¹¹John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick in *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations Of Clement And Origen*, The Library Of Christian Classics. Vol. II (London: SCM Press LTD, 1954), 206.

¹²Jay, *On Prayer*, 93.

¹³Origen, *On Prayer*, 3.1.

and indicate that a vow or promise is taking place.¹⁴ However, he claims that the word εὐχῆ also means “to entreat” or “to pray” to God. Pharaoh calls to Moses and Aaron and says unto them, “Entreat (εὐξασθε) the Lord for me, and let him take away the frogs from me, and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may do sacrifice unto the Lord (Exodus 8:8).”

While Origen intends to show that εὐξασθε has the meaning of prayer, one may also notice that the idea of a vow is still present, in so far as Pharaoh attempts to make a bargain with God. Thus, in order to make sure that one sees how εὐχῆ can be employed to mean prayer, he cites the next verse in Exodus where the idea of a vow is not present:

“And Moses said unto Pharaoh, Appoint for me when I shall entreat (εὐξομαι) for thee, and for thy servants, and for thy people, to destroy the frogs from thee and thy people and your houses. Only in the river shall they remain (Exodus 8:9).”¹⁵

From here, Origen sights several more passages from the story of the plagues in Exodus in order to show that εὐχῆ does in fact have the meaning of prayer.¹⁶

The term προσευχῆ is dealt with by Origen in the same manner. It is employed in the story of Hannah in the First Book of Kings:

“And Eli the Priest sat upon a seat by the door posts of the temple of the Lord. And she was in bitterness of soul and she vowed (προσηυξάτο) unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow (ηὐξάτο εὐχῆν), and said, O Lord of Hosts, I though wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, and wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord as a gift all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head (1 Samuel 1:9-11)”

Again, Origen believes that by paying attention to the words προσηυξάτο πρὸς κυρίον, καὶ

¹⁴Origen, *On Prayer*, 3.4.

¹⁵Ibid., 3.2.

¹⁶Ibid., 3.3.

ηυξατο ευχην, one will see that Hannah “prayed unto the Lord” and “vowed a vow” which attests to the fact that προσευχη can be used to mean prayer just as it can be used to denote that a vow is taking place.¹⁷

After attesting to presence of prayer in scripture, Origen moves to defend the necessity of prayer by presenting the arguments of those who claimed to be Christians but neglected the practice altogether. First, they believed that prayer was unnecessary because of God’s foreknowledge and fatherly love. Since God knows all things before they come into being, there is no need to pray to him who knows what one needs before he asks (Matthew 6:8). It is fitting then that the Father of all, who knows what things one needs before he asks, should, out of his love, provide for his children without waiting for them to ask as if they are unable or ignorant of what to ask for.¹⁸

Secondly, since God foreknows what will be, it stands to reason that he also foreordains what will be such that nothing comes to pass that is contrary to what he has foreordained. So then, just as a man would be deemed foolish for praying for the sun to rise and thinking that what would happen without his prayer comes to pass through his prayer, so the man would be foolish to think that his prayers bring to pass things that have already been ordained by God.¹⁹

The final argument against the necessity of prayer is as follows:

“If, moreover, sinners are estranged from the womb (Psalm 58:3) and the righteous is separated from his mother’s belly (Galatians 1:15), and if, they being not yet born neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it is said, the elder shall serve the younger (Romans 9:11-12), then in vain do we ask for remission of sins, or to receive the Spirit of strength

¹⁷Origen, *On Prayer*, 4.1-2.

¹⁸Ibid., 5.2.

¹⁹Ibid., 5.3.

that we may be able to do all things through Christ which strengthen us (Phillipians 4:13).”²⁰

Furthermore, if the Father chose all those that are to be saved before the foundation of the world that they might be predestined unto adoption by Christ (Ephesians: 1: 4-5), then it is impossible for those who have been chosen to fall away from their election and it is impossible for those who have not been chosen to be foreordained, making prayer useless: “For those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).”²¹

After representing his opponent’s arguments, Origen begins his rebuttal by appealing to the situation in a philosophical manner. He reasons that, of those things in creation that move or are in motion, some are moved by outside agency whereas rational beings are moved through themselves. The distinction is made so that one may see how rational beings are different from the rest of creation in their ability to possess free will.²² Therefore, those who do not allow that anything is in mans power admit that man is not a living creature and that man is not a rational being, which is foolish.

Next, he appeals to man’s common experience to prove the presence of free will. A man eats, walks, accepts and disagrees with certain opinions, and dissents from others all according to his own free will. He explains:

“Therefore, just as there are certain opinions to which it is impossible for a man to agree, even if he go over the argument ten thousand times, multiplying and employing persuasive

²⁰Origen, *On Prayer*, 5.4.

²¹Ibid., 5.5.

²²Ibid., 6.1.

words, so with regard to practical human affairs it is impossible for anyone to argue that we have no free will at all.”²³

Origen questions whether anyone actually believes that nothing can be grasped by the mind or suspends judgment about everything and sits and waits for things to happen in a fatalistic way. He wonders who would not punish his servant when he does wrong or discipline his son for not rendering what is fitting to his parents? All these examples from life are given to show how man, including the determinist himself, behaves every day as though free will exists.

Finally, if free will exists with its numerous inclinations to virtue or vice, then it is necessarily known to God and has been since the foundation of the world. Origen explains the relation between man’s free will and God’s foreknowledge by distinguishing God’s foreknowledge from the wrong notion of God as a pre-determiner of all things.²⁴ He states:

“And in all the things which God prearranges in accordance with what he has seen concerning each action of our free will, what is necessary to meet it out of his providence appropriately to each movement of our free will has also been prearranged, and moreover what shall happen in accordance with the succession of things to come.”²⁵

What Origen is trying to say is that God, at the foundation of the world, saw what each action of man’s free will would be and did what was necessary to see that man’s actions played a part in shaping the future. Furthermore, Origen explains that God foresaw what a man’s prayer and fidelity would be and made arrangements accordingly. In order to illustrate, Origen gives two examples of how God might respond to two different men’s prayers. A man may pray wisely and blamelessly and God will hear him and act based upon the faithfulness of his prayer. However, another man may pray for things that are not profitable for him nor fitting for God and God will

²³Origen, *On Prayer*, 6.2.

²⁴John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook To Origen* in *The Westminster Handbooks To Christian Theology* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 38.

²⁵Origen, *On Prayer*, 6.3.

not hear him and act based upon the unfaithfulness of his prayer.²⁶ Summarily, Origen contends that God's divine plan includes within it the invitation to human beings to share in shaping destiny through prayer and fidelity.²⁷

In this section of the treatise, Origen deals with the reality of prayer in scripture and how it can be reconciled with issues such as free will, foreknowledge, and the predestination of God. While one may ultimately disagree with Origen's conclusions on how these things go together, he rightly defends the importance of viewing prayer as a necessity for the Christian life. Thus, the reader is able to see Origen stress the importance of contemplating the God of providence who deems it necessary that we ask things of him in prayer.

The Spiritual Benefits Of Prayer

Knowledge of both the proper method and the proper subject-matter of prayer was necessary to Origen. As was mentioned earlier, he argues that man does not know how he ought to pray or what he ought to pray in and of himself. What he needs is revelation from God through the words of Jesus Christ, in scripture, to pray accurately. Thus, he does not elaborate on any theoretical scheme on the subject-matter of prayer or of the proper disposition of him who prays, but goes to the Bible for concrete examples.²⁸

For Origen, the appropriate subject matter or the what of prayer is found in Jesus' supposed statements in Matthew: "Ask for the great things, and the small things shall be added

²⁶Origen, *On Prayer*, 6.4.

²⁷It should be noted that although Origen is presenting an apologetic for those within the church who believed that prayer was unnecessary, he also had in mind the Gnostics who were more inclined to theories of predeterminism and fatalism. They generally regarded the biblical instances of people praying to God for interventions and favors as simplistic pieties that were inappropriate for spiritually mature people and this had filtered over into the church as well. See McGuckin, *Handbook*, 38.

²⁸Jay, *On Prayer*, 82.

unto you; and ask for heavenly things and the earthly things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).” He also lists off several other things to pray for:

“And pray for them which despitefully use you (Matthew 5:44); and pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest (Matthew 9:38); and pray that ye enter not into temptation (Luke 22:40); and pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day (Matthew 24:20); and when you pray, use not vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7).”²⁹

Origen does not explain why he chose to list off these specific items except to cite scriptural examples for what one ought to pray about. He also doesn’t expound upon any of them except for the first statement that one should “ask for the great things, and the small things shall be added to you; and ask for heavenly things and the earthly things shall be added unto you.” The “great” and “heavenly” things are entirely spiritual blessings for ourselves and for others.³⁰

Origen indicates this by giving examples of effective prayer from the Scriptures. In doing so he radically allegorizes Hannah’s prayer for a child, Hezekiah’s prayer for health, the prayers of Mordecai and Esther for the salvation of their people, Judith’s prayer for victory, the prayers of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for deliverance from the fiery furnace, Daniel’s prayer for deliverance from the lion’s den, and Jonah’s prayer for deliverance from the belly of the whale.³¹

Hannah’s prayer, in Origen’s own words, is intended to symbolize souls that have become barren in their minds, experiencing unfruitfulness in their own intellects, but have become pregnant by the Holy Spirit through constant prayer and have brought forth words of salvation filled with principles of truth. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s deliverance from the fiery furnace is a picture of how men often fall into temptations that are hard to overcome

²⁹Origen, *On Prayer*, 2.2.

³⁰Jospeh Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible And Philosophy In Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 158.

³¹Origen, *On Prayer*, 13.2.

and that burn hotter than any flame. Even so, they come through them unharmed in every way through the power of their prayers. Also, Daniel's prayer for deliverance from the lion's den symbolizes how many evil men and evil spirits come against God's people, but through prayer these evil men and spirits can have their mouths stopped by the Lord so that they might not fasten their teeth upon the members of the church.³² Origen goes through the other stories explaining how each of them attributes to the fact that effective prayer focuses on spiritual blessings.

Since God intends for his people to ask for the "great" and "heavenly" things, which are spiritual blessing for ourselves and for others, it follows that they ought not ask for the "small" and "earthly" things, which are material blessings. Origen justifies this by giving spiritual meaning even to the material benefits gained in the prior instances of effective prayer. Hannah and Hezekiah had their prayers answered by being delivered from their barrenness and having children. This story is intended to symbolize how one can have his prayers answered that their barren and unfruitful ways would be replaced with spiritual ears that listen to the spiritual law. In the same manner, just as Mordecai, Esther and Judith were delivered from their enemies through prayer, so one may be delivered from their wicked spiritual enemies through prayer. Finally, Origen states:

"Moreover let him who knows what monster is typified by that which swallowed Jonah, and understands that it is the one spoken of by Job in the words, Let him curse it that curses that day, who is ready to engage the great monster (Job. 3:8), repent and pray, if at any time he be "in the belly of the monster" because of some disobedience, and he shall come out thence; and having come out, if he abide in obedience to the commands of God, he shall have power by the Goodness of the Spirit to prophesy even to the Ninevites of the present day who are perishing, and to become an occasion of salvation to them, neither being

³²Origen, *On Prayer*, 13.3.

displeased at the goodness of God, nor seeking to hinder him out of severity towards those who repent.”³³

Simply, one ought to ask for the “great” and “heavenly” things and so desire spiritual benefits. In doing so, one will be able to enjoy the greatest of things and allow the Father to supply him with the “small” and “earthly” things that he needs out of necessity.

Origen also reveals the proper method or the how of prayer. Paul Bradshaw contends that he, as well as other devout Christians of the second and third century, took seriously the apostolic injunction to “pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).” Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria both had developed this idea in their writings.³⁴ Clement, for example, in his picture of the true Christian (the Gnostic) wrote in reference to prayer: “We are commanded to reverence and to honor the same one, being persuaded that he is the Word, Savior, and Leader, and by him, the Father, not on special days, as some others, but doing this continually in our whole life and in every way.”³⁵ Origen also believes that there is a sense in which the whole life ought to be understood as prayer. Thus, he contends that any man who links together his prayer with deeds of duty and fits seemly actions with his prayer is the man who prays without ceasing, for his virtuous deeds or the commandments he has fulfilled are taken up as a part of his prayer. One can only be understood to be “praying without ceasing” if the whole life of the saint is viewed as on mighty integrated prayer.

However, Origen and Clement also speak of there being specific moments in the day that are set-aside for prayer. Bradshaw claims that the pattern of Christian Prayer at Alexandria appears to have been prayer at meals, prayer three times a day-morning, noon, and night-and

³³Ibid., 13.4.

³⁴Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer In The Early Church: A Study Of The Origen And Early Development Of The Divine Office* (Alcuin Club: SPCK, 1981), 48

³⁵Clement, *Stromata*, 7.7.

prayer again during the night which has possible parallels in first-century Judaism and may have been practiced continually from the earliest days of the church.³⁶ Accordingly, Origen states the following regarding the appropriate times for prayer:

“Prayer ought not be performed less than three times each day. This is clear from the practice of Daniel, who, when great danger threatened him, prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). And Peter, going up to the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, at which time also he saw the vessel let down from heaven, let down by the four corners (Acts 10:9, 11), gives an example of the middle of the three times of prayer spoken of by David before him: In the morning thou shalt hear my prayer; in the morning will I stand beside thee, and will look unto thee (Psalm 5:3). The last of the three is indicated in the words, “the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice (Psalm 141:2).” But not even the time of night shall we rightly pass without such prayer, for David says, At midnight I rose to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments (Psalm 119:62), and Paul, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, at midnight together with Silas at Philippi prayed and sang praises unto God, so that the prisoners heard them (Acts 16:25).”³⁷

This particular passage has sparked debate as to when Origen is saying the appointed times of prayer occurred. C.W. Dugmore has suggested that, because the middle of these three times is explicitly said to be the sixth hour (or noon), the other two are probably the third and the ninth (9 am and 3pm).³⁸ E.G. Jay challenges Dugmore’s view and claims that the three times of prayer advocated by Origen are night, noon, and evening. He says that Origen quotes Peter’s prayer at the sixth hour as an example of the middle of three times, and this sixth hour of prayer is what David was speaking of in the words “In the morning thou shalt hear my prayer...” The last of the three times of prayer is in the evening and the remaining time of prayer is in the night. Therefore,

³⁶Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 48.

³⁷Origen, *Prayer*, 12.2.

³⁸C.W. Dugmore, *The Influence Of The Synagogue Upon The Divine Office* (Oxford University Press: Humphrey Milford, 1944), 65.

to assume that Origen intended to suggest prayer at 9 am, noon, and 3pm makes him counsel prayer four times a day, for otherwise the night prayers are left unaccounted for.³⁹ This is exactly where Bradshaw enters the conversation and advocates, as was stated earlier, that Origen is commending a pattern of prayer three times during the day-morning, noon, and evening-together with a further occasion for prayer during the night. He does, however, agree with Jay that the third time ought to be understood as the evening because of Origen's quotation of the psalm verse "the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice."⁴⁰

In response, it ought to be noted first that the Church in the West seems to have taught prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hour (9 am, noon, 3pm) in the early part of the third century. The Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus⁴¹ teaches this as well as Tertullian who says that the most common hours of prayer are those hours that mark the intervals of the day- the third, sixth and ninth hours.⁴² Tertullian and The Apostolic Tradition also indicate that there were night prayers that occurred outside of those at the ninth hour,⁴³ which lends further evidence to Bradshaw's contention that Origen is advocating a further occasion for prayer during the night. Therefore, the fact that these things were known to Alexandria, along with Origen's clear statement that the sixth hour prayer of Peter is an example of the middle of the three times of prayer, which Jay seems to ignore, makes Bradshaw's morning, noon, evening view with a

³⁹Jay, *On Prayer*, 115-116.

⁴⁰Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer*, 49.

⁴¹St. Hippolytus, *Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of Rome*, 36.1-5, ed. and trans. by Gregory Dix in *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus Of Rome* (London: SPCK, 1968), 63-64. Cf. Jay, *On Prayer*, 116.

⁴²Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 25, trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 689. Cf. Jay, *On Prayer*, 116.

⁴³See Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 25 and St. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 36.7.

further occasion for prayer during the night most likely. As far as the ninth hour prayer is concerned, it seems that Origen is in fact advocating that it occurs in the evening, which would likely make 3pm too early. Even so, saying that Origen could not have been referring to the 3pm prayer as an evening prayer puts too much emphasis on the exact time, which Origen does not seem concerned with.

Origen indicates other things about the proper method of prayer. He discusses that the suitable place for prayer is a place consecrated to that purpose since it helps to put the mind in the right direction for prayer.⁴⁴ At any rate, one should avoid praying near the marital bed since it is inappropriate to pray in a place where even legitimate sexual intercourse occurs.⁴⁵ As far as postures and orientation are concerned, he states that one should kneel when he is accusing himself of sins before God; otherwise one should stand, facing east, with arms outstretched and eyes uplifted.⁴⁶ Origen does not go into detail as to why these were the proper methods for prayer in his day, but he does show his devotion to scripture by using it to back up his propositions. While it is obvious that Origen is concerned about the practicalities of prayer, his lack of detail indicates that they are not his main concern. His main concern is again the spiritual benefits that prayer provides. Origen states that simply preparing oneself to pray confers blessing. Therefore, before being concerned about the proper method of prayer, one must desire to have the proper disposition to pray.⁴⁷ Additionally, in order to be in the proper disposition to pray, one must call to mind his sins, forgive any grudges he has against others, and free himself of any disturbances

⁴⁴Origen, *On Prayer*, 8.2 and 9.2

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 2.2

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 9.1 and 9.3.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 8.2, 9.1., and 9.2

of mind.⁴⁸ Beyond this, by the very act of prayer, the soul becomes more spiritual. It separates itself from bodily and material concerns and turns entirely to spiritual things. Thus, Joseph Trigg is right to assert that Origen presented prayer, not as a duty that one owes God, but as an exercise conducive to the transformation of the entire personality.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In an effort to defend the necessity of prayer against those within church who had been convinced that it was useless, it has been suggested that Origen found it to be a vital part of the Christian life. It was vital because he believed that prayer, at its core, was a means for spiritual change. More specifically, it was to be the contemplation of God where spiritual benefits were conferred upon those praying just as was upon those who were being prayed for. Therefore, if one expected to have his spiritual life affected like it ought to be, then he would have to be committed to the discipline of prayer, seeking the “great” and “heavenly” things of the kingdom so that the “small” and “earthly” things may be added to him.

⁴⁸Ibid., 9.3, 10.1, and 10.2.

⁴⁹Trigg, *Origen*, 159.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Clement Of Alexandria. *The Stromata*. trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, And Clement Of Alexandria (Entire)*. Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. II. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.
- Eusebius. *Historia Ecclesiae*. trans. by Paul L. Maier in *The Church History*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991.
- Origen. *A Letter From Origen To Africanus*. trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First And Second*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. IV. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.
- _____. *Contra Celsum*. translated with an introduction & notes by Henry Chadwick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953.
- _____. *De Principiis*. trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Fathers Of The Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First And Second*, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol. IV. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.
- _____. *On Prayer*. ed. and trans. by Eric George Jay in *Origen's Treatise On Prayer*. London: SPCK, 1954.
- St. Hippolytus. *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of Rome*. ed. and trans by Gregory Dix under the title *The Treatise On The Apostolic Tradition Of St. Hippolytus Of Rome*. London: SPCK, 1968.
- Tertullian. *On Prayer*. trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*. Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF]. American Edition. Vol.3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

Secondary Sources

Bigg, Charles. *The Christian Platonists Of Alexandria: The 1886 Bampton Lectures*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.

Bradshaw, Paul F. *Daily Prayer In The Early Church: A Study Of The Origen And Early Development Of The Divine Office*. Alcuin Club: SPCK, 1981.

Chadwick, Henry and Oulton, John Earnest Leonard. *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations Of Clement And Origen*. The Library Of Christian Classics. Vol. II. London: SCM Press LTD, 1954.

_____. *Early Christian Thought And The Classical Tradition: Studies In Justin, Clement, And Origen*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Danielou, Jean. *Origen*. Translated by Walter Mitchell. London & New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Dugmore, C.W. *The Influence Of The Synagogue Upon The Divine Office*. Oxford University Press: Humphrey Milford, 1944.

De Faye, Eugene. *Origen And His Work*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1929.

Greer, Rowan A. translation and intro in *Origen: An Exhortation To Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue To The Commentary On The Song Of Songs, Homily XXVII On Numbers*. New York-Ramsey-Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979.

Jay, Eric George. ed. and trans in *Origen's Treatise On Prayer*. London: SPCK, 1954.

Hanson, R.P.C. *Allegory And Event*. Richmond: John Knoz Press, 1959.

Jeffers, James S. *The Greco-Roman World Of The New Testament Era: Exploring The Background Of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

McGuckin, John Anthony. *The Westminster Handbook To Origen* in *The Westminster Handbooks To Christian Theology*. Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Simpson, Robert L. *The Interpretation Of Prayer In The Early Church*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965

Smith, John Clark. *The Ancient Wisdom Of Origen*. London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992.

Trigg, Joseph Wilson. *Origen: The Bible And Philosophy In Third-Century Church*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983.