


Waiting
in Gratitude

Prayers of Joy



COLLECTED PRAYERS OF
WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, VOLUME 3

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

WITH BARBARA DICK

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COLLECTED PRAYERS
OF WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Acting in the Wake: Prayers for Justice

*Following into Risky Obedience: Prayers along the
Journey*

Waiting in Gratitude: Prayers of Joy

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FOREWORD



The saying attributed to Augustine, Luther, and John Wesley that “to sing is to pray twice” has another application among theological educators — that is, to pray before class is to lecture ten times. As privileged students of Walter Brueggemann and his colleagues at places like Eden Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary, we would hang on the prayers of our teachers. Their practice of prayer before lectures and seminars and for special and ordinary occasions would inflame and inform our imaginations to be bold before the throne of grace. Among none has this been more true than for Professor Brueggemann.

For most of us the exercise was a powerful performance that would astound and convict, and for a few it played its intended role of vocational formation. A dear colleague and onetime student of Professor Brueggemann, the Rev. Dr. Martha Robertson, now emerita professor of contextual education at Eden Theological Seminary, continues, with renowned skill, to hone the craft of prayer learned from her seminary professors. Once I asked her how she did it. How are her prayers so vivid, honest, present, gorgeous, and arresting? “I practice paying attention,” she said.

“I keep notes on experiences, language, and events. And I relish the chance to delight God and others with what I share in prayer.”

Delighting God is the “chief end of humankind,” according to the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which begins, “What is the chief end of humankind? To worship and enjoy God forever.” In their practice of prayer, Martha and our professors show that this posture of paying attention to God in life can result in having the power of prayer. In other words, that possession is not so much a gift as it is a fruit born of practice, nurtured by everyday devotion.

Think of Serena Williams practicing the toss of her serve hundreds of times a week, or Wayne Gretzky skating and handling the puck for hours on end. That level of devotion, when practiced by the gifted, yields greatness. The foundation of it all is much hard work, sometimes tedious effort. In the legacy of Walter Brueggemann’s teaching, writing, and praying, of which this trilogy of volumes is an archive, we see the fruit of this discipline of devotion. He makes it look easy, or at least like second nature, but do not miss that it is a harvest of a lifetime of hard work grounded in paying close attention to life and God in purposeful communities of learning and faith.

Professor Brueggemann’s preface to this volume makes clear that this collection’s focus on joy is not a denial of pain and suffering in our lives. In fact, the Psalms, which provide so much of the textual basis for his prayers, often link lament, woe, and complaint with thanksgiving and joy shared with God. Why does he have to emphasize this link? Because too

often the rhetoric of contemporary popular Christian piety proclaims a facile victory over lament that is not scriptural and indeed is idolatrous. Turn to the Prophets, Psalms, the Gospels, and the letters of Paul, and see that lament and praise, suffering and deliverance, agony and ecstasy are bound together in a dialogue of faith. To repress the expression of this struggle is to eclipse the space of grace honed by God's people as we give voice to our fear, pain, and grief in the midst of our hope in God.

This volume shares prayers in two sections: joy in life and joy in Christ. The two categories (much like lament and praise) overlap, and yet the distinction is instructive. Professor Brueggemann notes that his particular vocation has provided varied opportunities to pray publicly in the events of the everyday life of a father, grandfather, theological educator, friend, and person of the church. The prayers gathered here that, much like Scripture, dive into the specificity of marriages, baptisms, retirements, ordinations, and installations showcase the presence of God encountered up close, in people's lived lives, in Walter's lived life. The intimacy of these glimpses of family, friends, students, and colleagues held before God and God's redeeming love are bread crumbs to the work of paying close attention and discerning God's presence and purpose in all our lives and living, whatever is happening and wherever we are. We are invited not merely to observe in general, but also to follow along in all the details of our contexts and lives.

The category of joy in Christ offers testimony to the practice of faith that is trust in God's redeeming love at work in the ministry of Jesus and his death

and resurrection. The apostle Paul used the Psalms and Prophets to illumine how the practice of this faith yields space for joy (Phil. 3:1, 4:4). Brueggemann's prayers arise from his exegesis of biblical texts, like Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Isaiah 4:2–6, engaged in the context of his teaching on particular occasions. This is his ministry, his priestly bearing of oil in the midst of his congregations of students, readers, and listeners. Each prayer offers evidence of how the painstaking devotion of careful attention to sacred texts, lives, and situations yields insight into God's inbreaking saving grace and the eruption of joy it brings — always specific to the time and full of the hope that resists fear in its myriad toxic and looming expressions of cynicism, cruelty, grievance, and death. Indeed, "there is a balm in Gilead!"¹ And if you don't know what "Gilead" means, look it up. There will be a measure of grace for you in the effort, Brueggemann teaches us.

To learn from Professor Brueggemann, be it in the classroom, the keynote lecture, the commentary, the article, or any one of his many books, is to witness regularly and yet somehow also astonishingly the activation of the Bible's witness of a myriad of ways to wrestle a blessing from God. These prayers, and those of the other two volumes, are particular performances of that activation. Yes, as performances, they entertain, amaze, and even delight, and they are aimed in this current collection ultimately to teach. Pray as Walter Brueggemann does, not because you can, but because if you try, you will know joy.

Deborah Krause
Eden Theological Seminary

Notes

1. African American spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #792. Future references to *Glory to God* are abbreviated *GtG*.

PREFACE TO VOLUME 3



This collection of my prayers is marked by *joy*: gladness of faith concerning the reality of God, the wonder of God's work, and the abundance of God's good creation. For those readers who know my previous work, it will be recognized that I have focused very much of my energy and attention on the laments (complaints) of Israel—prayers of urgent need. Such a reader may wonder if, with this accent on joy, I have turned away from my long-running focus on laments. But my current focus on joy is not at all turning away from laments. And the reason is this.

As Claus Westermann (*Praise and Lament in the Psalms*) already has shown, with a few notable exceptions, Israel's *laments* dramatically move toward and end in *joy, thanks, and an assurance of being heard*. Thus, the recurring dramatic structure of Israel's laments is that the one who laments becomes certain that, in response to an urgent petition, God has heard and will answer. That responsive intervention by God (which is regularly implied in the Psalms) allows and causes a dramatic reversal from lament to joy. We may cite three exemplars of this transformation that evokes joy.

1. In Psalm 30 the psalmist affirms:

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes in the morning.

v. 5

The move is from weeping to joy. And then the psalmist narrates the dramatic exchange that leads to the transformation:

- a petition is voiced that asks God to hear (vv. 8–10);
- it is affirmed that God has acted decisively to “clothe me with joy” (v. 11);
- the transformation evokes loud praise and thanks (v. 12).

2. It is evident that Israel’s exodus narrative is patterned in the same way. The narrative begins in desperate lament:

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. (Exod. 2:23)

The following narrative reports on YHWH’s repeated emancipatory actions. The narrative concludes with the exuberant joy of Miriam and the other women:

Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

15:21

Thus the movement from weeping to joy is the same as in Psalm 30.

3. In the Fourth Gospel, the reassuring words of Jesus move in the same way:

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20–22)

Again there is an abrupt reversal from *pain* to *joy*.

In all three instances, the conclusion is one of joy (Ps. 30:5; Exod. 15:21; John 16:20–22). But in all three usages, the affirmation of joy is preceded by a full acknowledgment of weeping, groaning, and pain. In each case, the negative reality is transformed by the faithful power of God who makes possible the great inexplicable gift of joy. Prayers of joy appear at the end of the dramatic processes when the community of faith (and its members) are rescued and emancipated by God from troubles with which they could not themselves cope.

As is evident in this collection of my prayers, however, not all of our prayers of joy arise from lament resolved. Many of these prayers arise from our marking, treasuring, and appreciating specific moments of significance that characterize our shared lives. Because I am elementally a churchman, many of these prayers are markers of special occasions in the life of the church. This includes a

prayer for Jeff, for David (along with William), for Stacy, and for Mike in their ministries, and for dear Charlie on his fiftieth anniversary, for installations that mark beginnings in ministry of Elizabeth, the two Davids, and my well-beloved colleague Bill Brown.

The circle of the church happily overlaps with the circles of our families and zones of our lives. The God to whom we pray is the one

who, from our mothers' arms,
hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.¹

As a result, included here are prayers for the confirmation of my dearly beloved granddaughter Emilia; for the weddings of Shannon and Jonathan, Corinne and Jim, and Nina and Marius; the medical ministry of Tad; the continuing study of John; a remembrance of Bob Hanson at his death. As we name particular persons, we are mindful of how greatly we treasure them:

For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild:
Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.²

And just to be inclusive, there is a grateful mention of Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), the godfather of my kind of scholarship from the University of Halle, who died the year before I

was born but whose work and influence linger mightily.

Beyond that, there is in these prayers a wide, deep practice of gratitude for the mundane matters of our life that are received as gifts from God: bread, family, book, persons of courage, singing saints, and the wonder of ministry. These prayers savor the particularities of our lives. In an early story, John Updike has his protagonist ponder the Eucharist. The lead character in the story concludes, "The world is the host; it must be chewed."³ These prayers are a glad "chewing of the world" as we mark and celebrate its concrete freighted reality. The sum of these prayers is to voice our life back to God in wonder and gratitude for God's "countless gifts" that are indeed beyond our counting. We nevertheless continue to count them! We name them one by one. And with each naming we are dazzled by the abundant generosity of this generous, self-giving God. It is for this reason that our prayers inescapably spill over with lyrical rhetoric that defies explanation or quantification. Our words are, at their best, scarcely adequate for what we receive, know, and trust in gratitude.

Finally, we arrive at complete joy. The church, beyond ministry and family, ponders the unutterable reality of Christ, the embodied reality of the self-giving God of the gospel. "Joy in Christ" is the watchword of Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Indeed, Paul can hardly find adequate words for his confident delight in the presence and power of Christ. So he writes to the church:

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. . . .

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Phil. 3:1; 4:4).

This joy is “finally,” after everything else has been said and done. “Finally” there is the wonder of Easter and the gift of new life. This joy is “always,” in every circumstance. That “joy always” for Paul is marked by prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving (4:6), and culminates in “the peace of God” (v. 7). Before he finishes his letter, Paul brings his joy down to the actual practice of the congregation:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. (v. 10)

Paul is mindful of the specific persons to whom he writes and finds delight in their faithful generosity toward him. Indeed, their generosity is for him a “fragrant offering, . . . acceptable and pleasing to God” (v. 18). In his deep joy, the distinction between *mundane human acts* and *confidence in God* is readily blurred. It is all one, because joy is no time to sort things out. Deep joy, rather, is to take the sum of all that we are and have and have received as a gift with gratitude that is as boundless as God’s own goodness.

It becomes clear that the practice of prayer, specifically prayers of joy, can be no *add-on* to an otherwise lived life. Such joy can be no ingredient in a

life of fear, greed, hate, or violence. That is because such joyous prayer is not an *elective* that we may choose for the edge of our existence. It is, rather, a new *center for all of our life from which arises all of the practices commensurate with God's own goodness*:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22–23)

As I complete this triad of collections of my prayers, I am grateful to the community of those who have been my long-running partners in prayer. Among them are generations of seminary students and many pastors who day by day, “when other helpers fail and comforts flee,”⁴ speak prayers of hope, comfort, and reassurance. Such good pastoral work marks in our common life both births and deaths, and many freighted moments in between. The work is to continue to uphold the world with prayer, a quaint but determined insistence that the world does not consist in *wealth, wisdom, and power*, but in the practice of *love, justice, and righteousness* (Jer. 9:23–24).

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary

Notes

1. Martin Rinkart, "Now Thank We All Our God," trans. Catherine Winkworth, *GtG*, #643, st. 1.
2. Folliott Sandford Pierpoint, "For the Beauty of the Earth," *GtG*, #14, st. 4.
3. John Updike, "The Music School," in *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* (New York: Random House, 2012), 418.
4. Henry Francis Lyle, "Abide with Me," *GtG*, #836, st. 1.

ONE



PRAYERS OF
JOY IN *LIFE*

FOR THE FAMILY



God of all our years,
we are this night filled with gratitude
for all the ways in which you have kept us and
blessed us.
We give you thanks for all the years that stretch
from ancient Bertha
to the youngest among us tonight.

We give you thanks for our dead whom we
remember as we treasure them.
We give you thanks for all those in our family
who are marked by integrity,
bravery, and faithfulness.

As we part company tonight,
we pray for your mercy upon us,
that you will keep us safe and well until we
meet again.

And before you finish, we pray that you will bring
your work
of justice,
of freedom, and
of peace
to your whole creation.
We pray in confidence of your mercy. Amen.

—July 28, 2007, Hallman Family Reunion, Kansas City

EMILIA'S CONFIRMATION



Lord Jesus,

We pray your blessing on your beloved disciple,
Emilia,

that she may be not only smart, but wise;

that she may be not only strong,

but compassionate;

that she may grow into maturity,

to love you as you love her . . .

fully,

without reservation,

forever. Amen.

—June 4, 2017

FOR SHANNON AND JONATHAN



(On the Occasion of Their Wedding)

You birth us and we reach out for nourishment;
We grow alone and crave companionship;
We sleep and wake,
 hunger and eat,
 work and rest,
 and yearn for embrace.

And then, wondrously, you break that cycle of solitude:
 You open your heart to love us,
 You love us from all eternity . . . and beyond
 that . . .

You make love real and concrete and daily and intimate
 by giving us to each other,
 by letting us give love and receive love
 and be bound in love that defies all our
 loneliness and
 the long creep of our death.

On this day we give thanks
for Shannon and for Jonathan,
 for their families who loved them to this day, and
 for their courage and passion and hope.
 We pray rich joy for this twosome,
 and beyond this twosome to their neighbors.
 We pray them glad obedience to your call,
 that what is intimate and what is public,
 that what is gift and what is task,

may flourish in your mercy and goodness
all their days.

Bless them, and through them bless your world
in justice and peace,
in mercy and forgiveness,
all in the name of your love enfleshed in Jesus.
Amen.

—July 25, 2005