Foreword

One of the most moving stories in the New Testament is that of Jairus, a synagogue leader who had a little daughter on the point of death, who came to Jesus and "repeatedly begged" him to lay his hands on her, and heal her. As Jesus was on his way to Jairus's house, he was detained by a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for many years, and she too was desperate for healing. She managed just to touch his clothes, and when she did so, Jesus realized someone had been healed and stopped to find out who it was. While he was talking with her, messengers arrived from Jairus's house with heartbreaking news: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further" (Mark 5:35).

It is hard to imagine how devastating this must have been to this desperate father, whose hopes had been raised so high by the fact that Jesus was on the way to help. But then death intervened, and it seemed there was no reason to "trouble the teacher any further."

This story illustrates what many Christians believe about prayer. On the one hand, prayer is an incomparable source of hope because it puts us in touch with a God of love for whom nothing is impossible. Even when things are humanly or naturally impossible, God can act to redeem things. On the other hand, many Christians believe that death puts a sudden stop to our prayers.

The reasons for thinking this, however, are not due to any notion that God is powerless in the face of death, as the messengers from Jairus's house appeared to think. Rather, they come from another direction. In his final book, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, C. S. Lewis strongly affirmed his own belief in prayer for the dead, noting that at his age, many of the people he most loved were already dead, and he wonders how the rest of his prayers would survive if prayers for the dead were forbidden. "The action," he writes, "is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only

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the most compulsive case against it would deter me." And there is the rub. Many Christians do believe there is a "compulsive theological case" that strictly forbids at least certain kinds of prayers for the dead.

In this two-volume work—the present book, *Understanding Prayer for the Dead*, and its successor, *Practicing Prayer for the Dead*—James B. Gould argues powerfully not only that there is no good theological case against prayer for the dead, but also that there is a powerful theological case *in favor* of it. Gould's case is wide ranging in its argument, and he deals with the history of prayer for the dead in Christian theology as well as the philosophical and theological issues raised by the practice. His work will be recognized as a landmark on these vital issues for years to come.

The author distinguishes four kinds of prayers for the dead, and notes that the main Christian traditions have differed on the matter of which of these kinds of prayer are appropriate. The four kinds of prayer are for consummation, growth, purification, and salvation. While the first kind of prayer is most widely accepted and practiced, by many Protestants as well as Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, the second and third types of prayer are accepted less commonly by Protestants, but are practiced by the Orthodox and Catholics. However, the fourth kind of prayer, for salvation, is generally rejected by all three traditions, on the ground that postmortem repentance and salvation are impossible.

Gould's ambitious project in these two volumes is to persuade Christians of all three traditions to embrace a more expansive theology of prayer for the dead than their official theology endorses. In short, he argues that there are good theological reasons to embrace all four kinds of prayer for the dead, and this requires Catholics to modify their views, as well as Protestants and Evangelicals.

As a Protestant who has written a book defending a doctrine of purgatory, including postmortem repentance, I am both intrigued by Gould's argument as well as attracted to it. Indeed, the early Christian practice of prayer for the dead, particularly prayer for purification, was one of the factors that led to the eventual development of the doctrine of purgatory. The traditional doctrine of purgatory however, pertains only to persons who die in a state of grace, so postmortem salvation is excluded.

Part of Gould's theological rationale for salvation prayer for the dead is his belief in universalism. His embrace of universalism is part of his transition from the views he held growing up as the son of missionaries in Nigeria, where he was taught that only those who heard the

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gospel in this life could be saved. While I reject universalism, it is worth noting that there are still good reasons to affirm postmortem conversion for persons who have not heard the gospel in this life, or who have not decisively rejected it. So the rationale for salvation prayers for the dead does not depend on the assumption of universalism—a point Gould himself acknowledges.

One of the most compelling aspects of these books is the case the author makes for the spiritually enriching power of a more expansive view of prayer, a case he develops in detail in the second volume. While theological truth is not determined by devotional practice, it is often shaped and informed by it.

These books are a challenge to rethink a fascinating and existentially engaging set of philosophical and theological issues, as well a warm invitation to enrich our relationship with God and the human community, whether living or dead. And as Jairus and his friends learned, death may not be the insurmountable barrier we think it is.

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