

GOD
be in my
Head

The Sarum Prayer

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Day 1

on the point of prayer in the first place

Prayer is about improving our conscious contact with God, a phrase from Step 11 of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.¹

Like so much about AA, “improving our conscious contact with God” is a phrase loaded with time-tested and hard-fought wisdom. It suggests we have some agency; there are things we can do to improve our conscious contact with God. But it also implies that contact with God is more mysterious than our limited brains could possibly be conscious of at any given time. We may, in fact, be in contact with God *all the time*. The conscious contact part may simply be a matter of relaxing into something that’s been there all along, like dipping our canoe paddle into a river that just keeps rolling along with or without our conscious contact.

Practical program that it is, AA offers a handful of prayers that have helped its members. They are generally short, to the point, and memorable.

The Sarum Prayer isn't part of the AA lineup, but it could be. Take a moment and try it on for size.

God be in my head—and in my understanding

God be in my eyes—and in my looking

God be in my mouth—and in my speaking

God be in my heart—and in my thinking

God be at my end—and at my departing.

Day 2

on the value of keeping a few set prayers handy

Of course we can make up prayers on the spot and do all the time—prayers like “Help” or “Let me get this job” or “You’ve got to be kidding me!”—but it also helps to have a few set prayers handy that have stood the test of time; prayers that remain in circulation because they work for enough people. These prayers are the winners of a fitness competition—like our genes, for example.

We’re alive and old enough to read (or be read to) because we’ve all been fortunate enough to inherit genes that make life possible. We are a real biological success story in fact and so are all of our direct ancestors. Prayers go through a similar sorting process. Of all the prayers uttered or written down, only a relative few have survived for our use because enough people found them helpful for improving conscious contact with God.

We could do worse than to memorize a handful of such prayers to deploy when needed. Like the password for our smartphones, we don’t want to have to look up a prayer when the need strikes.

This is a good one, the Sarum Prayer:

God be in my head—and in my understanding

God be in my eyes—and in my looking

God be in my mouth—and in my speaking

God be in my heart—and in my thinking

God be at my end—and at my departing.

Day 3

on the value of very old prayers

There's an eatery near my home called The Beaver Trap, specializing in *poutine*—French fries smothered in gravy and cheese curds, stuff that will kill you faster than fries alone. The sign says, “Loading fries since 2009.” That's a long time ago! . . . if you're seven.

In the Sarum Prayer, we join voices that go back many centuries. Life in that time wasn't much different than when our forebears switched from hunter-gathering to farming 10,000 years earlier, give or take a millennium. Infant mortality was high, global population less than 500 million. People weren't into leveraging the Internet, plastic surgery, robotics, or artificial intelligence. They were in touch with their unadorned and essential humanity, which is with us today beneath all the sophisticated accoutrements of our time.

How we express ourselves is constrained by our culture. My parents didn't grow up hearing their parents tell them “I love you,” a cultural constraint. I think they were missing something. Just as we're missing things their culture allowed, like going through the day without being exposed to 4,000 ads.

Our hearts are bigger than the culture of any particular era, including our own. It helps to have old-old prayers spoken from a very different time zone to express things that our time doesn't recognize or emphasize. It's like scratching an itch in the middle of your back that your contemporary culture can't reach.

Settle in to this old, old prayer, the Sarum Prayer.

God be in my head—and in my understanding

God be in my eyes—and in my looking

God be in my mouth—and in my speaking

God be in my heart—and in my thinking

God be at my end—and at my departing.

Day 4

on prayer as a bodily function

The theme of the Sarum Prayer is *God be in my body*. We'd normally say *God be in my spirit*—meaning some ethereal/non-material expression of us that may or may not exist. This prayer is different—more physical, more fleshy, more body-centered.

God be in my head

God be in my eyes

God be in my mouth

God be in my heart (meaning the thing
that beats in our chest)

What kind of God is this? Not a standard-issue one. When the book of Genesis was compiled (around 500 BCE) there was a common conception that God wouldn't directly create heaven-earth, because physical matter was too profane. So people imagined less and less concentrated versions of the divine called "demi-urges" that emanated from the pure divine. The one furthest out from God, the most diluted emanation of deity, did the dirty work of creating. This prayer, by contrast, reflects the significance

of the incarnation—God inhabited human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The “big deal” of this isn’t, Jesus is amazing! The big deal is that the God revealed in Jesus is at home in human flesh.

Which means such a God could be at home in us.

To appreciate how physical this prayer is, you might try touching your head for the first line, near your eyes for the second, your mouth for the third, your chest for the fourth, then holding both hands open for the final line of the prayer.

Let us pray,

God be in my head—and in my understanding

God be in my eyes—and in my looking

God be in my mouth—and in my speaking

God be in my heart—and in my thinking

God be at my end—and at my departing.