# PRAYER AND REVELATION

Vincent Cheung

# PRAYER AND REVELATION

Copyright © 2012 by Vincent Cheung
http://www.vincentcheung.com

Previous edition published in 2003.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted without the prior permission of the author or publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

# CONTENTS

**PREFACE**

**PRAYER AND THE TRIUNE GOD**

1. PRAYING TO THE FATHER
2. PRAYING THROUGH THE SON
3. PRAYING BY THE SPIRIT

**PRAYER AND THE DIVINE NATURE**

4. PRAYER AND SOVEREIGNTY
5. PRAYER AND OMNISCIENCE
6. PRAYER AND TRANSCENDENCE

**PRAYER AND THE MORAL LIFE**

7. PRAYER AND MOTIVATION
8. PRAYER AND OBEDIENCE
9. PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE

**PRAYER AND THE INNER LIFE**

10. PRAYER AND EXPERIENCE
11. PRAYER AND REVELATION

# PREFACE

In his book, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray writes, "Reading a book about prayer, listening to lectures and talking about it is very good, but it won't teach you to pray. You get nothing without exercise, without practice."[1] This is complete rubbish. If reading, listening, and talking about prayer "won't teach you to pray," then how are these activities "very good"? If I get "nothing" without practice, then why should I read his book?

His book is supposed to contain insights about prayer drawn from the instructions and examples of Jesus.[2] But his statement implies that practice or experience is a superior teacher than the very words and acts of Christ. The horror of the situation dawns on us when we realize that most people seem to share Murray's view about learning spiritual things.[3] They say that you can read about it and talk about it, but experience is the best teacher. However, if experience is the best teacher, then Jesus is not the best teacher, and Scripture is not the best source of information. This is blasphemy.

The truth is that experience is the worst teacher, especially when it comes to learning spiritual things.[4] Our culture exalts learning by experience, and many Christians assume such a view even though it contradicts their supposed allegiance to God and Scripture. Against this popular view, we must dethrone experience and exalt revelation. A book that expounds on what the Bible says about the subject can teach you many things about prayer, including things that you must implement in your experience but that you can never learn from experience. We will begin with such a premise in contrast to all the volumes that make an idol out of the practice of prayer and that blaspheme the authority of Christ and the Scripture.

[1] Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*; Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999.

[2] We can learn from the "examples" of Jesus only in the sense that the words of Scripture tell us about the prayer life of Christ, so that we are still learning through reading, listening, and thinking, and not experience or observation. The Bible says that we should *be examples* of what it teaches, but this is different from saying that we should teach *by examples*. Since we are not perfect, how can a person know what to imitate and what not to imitate from us, unless he learns what is right and what is wrong by reading, listening, and thinking about the words of Scripture? But if he already knows these things from Scripture, then our examples at best serve as encouragement to contemplate and follow the words of Scripture, so that the examples themselves do not convey information about how a Christian ought to live. The information comes from Scripture, not from experience or examples. There are no infallible examples for us to learn from today except those described and interpreted by the words of Scripture. Although Jesus was sinless, so that all he did was righteous, when he set an example in John 13:15, the disciples did not understand it until he taught them in words. Thus the lesson was in the words, not in the act itself. The example served to illustrate the words. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 10:6 refers to the Israelites as examples and warnings, but the lesson came in Paul's interpretation of their lives.

[3] For example, Donald Whitney writes, "There are many good resources for learning how to pray, but the best way to learn how to pray is to pray"; *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; Navpress, 2002; p. 69. This is an insult to Christ and the Scripture.

[4] See the chapter, "Prayer and Experience."

# PRAYER AND THE TRIUNE GOD

The doctrinal formulation for the Trinity is that God is "one in essence and three in person." This does not entail a contradiction, since we do not say that God is "one in essence and three in essence," or that God is "one in person and three in person." That is, we do not say that God is one and three in the same sense, but that he is one in one sense and three in another sense. There is no contradiction in the doctrine.

By "essence," we refer to the attributes of God, such as his omnipotence and omniscience. The sum of the divine attributes constitutes the definition of God, as the sum of any object's attributes constitutes the definition of that object. By "person," we refer to a system of consciousness in the Godhead. God has one definition, and there are three persons who wholly and equally participate in that definition.

The doctrine does not translate into polytheism. It does not compel us to affirm three distinct and independent deities. This is because the God of the Bible is by definition a Trinity; therefore, one Trinity constitutes only one God, and there is only one God in the sense that there is only one divine Trinity. The biblical definition of deity is that God is a Trinity, so if there is one Trinity of divine persons, there is one God. There is no other God other than the God of the Bible, and the God of the Bible is a Trinity.

This doctrine sets Christianity apart from all other worldviews and philosophies, whether religious or secular. Since this is a foundational belief about reality that contradicts all other worldviews on their views of reality, it means that if Christianity is true, then all other religions and philosophies are false, and if a non-Christian religion or philosophy is true, then Christianity is false. Christians should be unafraid to affirm this, and to defend Christianity as the only truth.[5]

[5] See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Captive to Reason*, and *Apologetics in Conversation*.

# 1. PRAYING TO THE FATHER

**This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:9-10)**

If you are not a Christian, then you are not a child of God, but a child of Satan. All men and women are God's creatures, but when we are speaking of the relationship that we have with God, then humanity is divided into the children of God and the children of Satan. Ever since the beginning of human history, the two groups have been in conflict with each other (Genesis 3:15).

Those who think that all human beings are the children of God contradict what the Bible says, and so they condemn themselves. Jesus says that his critics have the devil as their father, and that they make their disciples twice as much the children of hell (John 8:44; Matthew 23:15). Paul writes:

> If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ….For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Romans 8:9, 15-16)

The passage refers to a specific "Spirit," that is, the Spirit of Christ. If you do not have the Spirit of Christ, you do not belong to Christ, and if you do not belong to Christ, you cannot call God your Father. The Bible contradicts the notion that humanity is one big family, but it insists that the family of God consists only of Christians. If you are not a Christian, you cannot call God your Father, because your father is Satan. It makes no difference if you belong to a religion that you consider to be very proper, or if you think that you are a very good person. If you are not a Christian, you are a child of the devil, and you are full of filth and wickedness.

Thus when Jesus instructs his disciples to address God as their Father, he excludes all non-Christians from access to God. All who approach God the Father must do so through God the Son, Jesus Christ, and Christians have the Spirit of Christ in their hearts by which they call God their Father. This exclusive

view is contrary to what many people want to believe. Even those who call themselves Christians often hesitate to state the biblical position. But since this is what the Bible teaches, we must never obscure the message. If Christians have not been so afraid to offend people, we would not have so many false converts in our churches.

If this is offensive to you, people also complained about Jesus: "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you?'" (John 6:60-61). How did Jesus handle their discontent? Instead of softening his teaching, he confronted them with the doctrine of election: "He went on to say, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him'" (v. 65).[6] This was not well received, for the next verse says, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v. 66).

If you are offended by a straightforward presentation of the gospel, then God has not chosen you for salvation, and you have no ability to accept it. Or, it is possible that you are among the chosen ones, but God has decided for you to accept the gospel at a later time. On the other hand, reprobates should be offended at the message. We are not supposed to distort it so that it offends no one. The gospel offends people not because it is irrational, but reprobates are offended at the gospel because they are stupid and sinful, and since God has not regenerated them, they cannot react to the gospel in a positive way (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

Perhaps you are one of the millions of false converts in our churches, and no one has made the gospel clear to you. Do you think that you are a Christian just because you repeated a prayer? Do you think that you are a Christian, even when you have not renounced all non-Christian religions and philosophies? If you have affirmed a doctrine that does not condemn non-Christian religions, then you have not affirmed the gospel. Do what Paul told the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Jesus teaches that we should pray to God the Father. Since the Father is a divine mind instead of a non-rational object, we are to use intelligible language to express our thoughts to him. This contradicts any religion that does not deal with a divine rational person. And since we must pray to the "Father" – this Father, a

definite person – we cannot pray to just any person. We pray only to the divine Father of the Bible. This "Father" is defined by a number of distinct attributes the sum of which restricts our conception of him to one specific person, so that prayers made to any other person is misdirected. This means that we must gain an accurate grasp of how the Bible defines and describes this divine person, so that the concept of God in our minds might correspond to the concept of God in Scripture.

We condemn the notion that it matters little what you believe about God as long as you are sincere. It is possible to sincerely believe something false and evil. To sincerely believe in the Buddha does not make you acceptable to God, since that would only make you sincerely wicked. God requires that we sincerely affirm the truth. Faith is important, and the object of faith is also important, because faith in the wrong object is not what the Bible calls faith at all. We must believe the right doctrines. We must define "God" – the object of our faith – according to what the Bible says about him.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) is often distorted by those who wish to advance their false ideas of God, and of what God would or would not do. They make inferences from the proposition, "God is love," that they think must be true if indeed God is love. But what is love? And what does it mean for God to be love? It does not follow that a God who is love would not send anyone to hell, since the same Bible says that he sends many people to hell so that he could torture them forever. It also does not follow that a God who is love would accept non-Christians, because the same Bible declares that he condemns non-Christians.

Some seize on the idea that God is love because they think that it neutralizes the punishment pronounced against those who disobey God's commandments. For example, they might say that since God is love, then he also loves the homosexual and will not judge him, and he will not damn to hell someone who has committed abortion or who supports it. But since these inferences contradict the teachings of the Bible, they are false inferences.

We must have a correct idea of love. If our idea of God's love contradicts what the Bible says about God or how the Bible defines and describes this love, then our idea of God's love must be false. The same Bible that says, "God is love," also says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). This verse comes from the same letter by the apostle John, but it is seldom mentioned. The next verse explains what "God is light" implies: "If we claim to have

fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (v. 6). Walking with God requires adherence to his standard of right living, and if you do not do this, then you are not walking with God. This passage on the light of God shines upon those who hide under the darkness of a distorted interpretation of "God is love," and exposes the fact that they are not really walking with God.

The same Bible that says, "God is love," also says, "God is light." And the same Bible that says, "God is light," also says, "God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). All three propositions are true, and they are consistent with one another, but the invalid inferences that people make from "God is love" often contradict the other two propositions. That God is a consuming fire does not mean that he will give you a warm and welcome feeling. The writer of Hebrews makes this statement as he tells his readers to worship God "with reverence and awe" (v. 28). The image of God as a consuming fire is associated with his anger, judgment, and power to destroy.[7] Wicked men disapprove of such a God, but there is nothing wrong with such a God. If God comes at you as a consuming fire, to punish you and to torture you, it is your fault. Paul tells his readers to recognize both the "kindness and severity" of God (Romans 11:22, NASB). He is severe against those who disobey him, but he is kind to his chosen ones, those who continue in his grace.

Some preachers tell people, "God is not mad at anybody." This is a lie, and it offers false comfort to non-Christians. The Bible teaches that if you are a non-Christian, God's hot anger is already upon you, and "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). Jesus says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus declares that anyone who is not with him is against him (Matthew 12:30). There is no neutral place. 1 John 5:12 says, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." You may suppress your knowledge of God and your rebellion against him (Romans 1:18), but God is keenly aware, and you will not get away with anything (Hebrews 4:13).

If you are a non-Christian, the full force of divine wrath will be poured out against you, perhaps in a moment you do not expect. You will hear God say, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). God's wrath is a policy of thought and action against his enemies that effects their utter ruin and endless

agony. If you die without faith in Jesus Christ, then God will throw you into hell and torture you forever in a lake of fire.

Preachers often obscure the wrath of God, and present him as a harmless clown. There are some "fire and brimstone" sermons, which the congregations detest, but even most of these sermons are almost always too mild to convey the horrors of hell, the helpless condition of those who are without Christ, and the greatness of God's mercy toward his chosen ones.

Hell is indeed frightening. You think surely I will tell you that God has sent Jesus Christ to make salvation possible for everyone, even you, so that in the end you will determine your own destiny, that you can save yourself from endless torment. But God does not leave even this for the sinner to decide. Jesus says that no one can be saved unless the Father has chosen him, and unless God first shows you mercy, you will not come to him and you cannot come to him. Thus even in this you are powerless, and completely at his mercy. The chosen ones will be saved, but the rest will burn in hell.

Therefore, cry out to God for mercy, and it may be that he has chosen you and has regenerated you, so that your plea would indeed come from a sincere heart, and not done in pretense or in carnal fright, and thus you shall have salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. If you think that you are a Christian, then believe and behave like a Christian. As Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Why do you call him "Lord," but refuse to do what he says (Luke 6:46)? Can it be that your profession of faith is false? You cannot cheat your way into heaven. Test yourself! "Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

[6] Jesus demonstrated that it is appropriate to explicitly confront people with the doctrine of election, even when we are speaking to unbelievers.
[7] Deuteronomy 4:21-27, 9:3; Psalm 50:3, 97:3; Isaiah 66:15; Hebrews 10:27.

# 2. PRAYING THROUGH THE SON

**There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)**

You do not have access to God unless you are a Christian.[8] Prayer is not just about what you say, but an important aspect of prayer has to do with where you stand in relation to God. Since the only way a person can have a right relationship with God is through Jesus Christ, only prayers from a Christian are acceptable to God. Only prayers presented through God the Son, Jesus Christ, are acceptable to God the Father.

Some people have proposed the absurd interpretation of the exclusivity of the Christian faith so as to say that Christ has made access to God possible for humanity in a general sense so that even a non-Christian may pray to God through him. "Of course Jesus Christ is the only way to God," they acknowledge, "but this means that if you are a sincere Muslim or Buddhist, you are saved through Christ." Some of them may not say it in these words, but this is what the theory amounts to, and it contradicts what Scripture teaches on the subject.

By "Jesus Christ," I do not refer to an abstract principle of "Christ" that is detached from the historical Jesus in the Bible or his identity as the second person of the Trinity. Rather, I refer to Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and the doctrine is that without an explicit affirmation of what the Scripture teaches about him, no one can have access to God. If you do not affirm the Trinity of God, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, and confess that these doctrines contradict all other religions, then you are not a Christian, and you do not have access to God. You are not acceptable to God, and you will suffer endless torment in hell. Just as you are not a Christian if you believe that there is more than one God, you are not a Christian if you think that Muslims will go to heaven, or that Buddhists have access to God in some sense.

The Bible says that God has chosen some people to be saved, and those whom he has chosen will approach him, but only through Jesus Christ. All others are specifically appointed for damnation.[9] Christians are saved through faith in Christ and have access to God, and all non-Christians are condemned to hell and

do not have access to God. This is what the Bible teaches, and this is Christianity. If you disagree with it, then you have rejected Christianity, and I challenge you to refute it.[10] It is dishonest and irrational to dismiss this view because you do not like it. Countless individuals will be condemned forever for suppressing the truth about God (Romans 1:18-19).

There are those who insist that all religions are essentially the same. They do not say that all the beliefs of all the religions are identical, but they are saying that they are similar enough on the most important matters so that it is possible for different religions to unite, that one religion should not challenge another one as false, and that no religion should claim to be exclusively true so that all the others are false. There are a number of problems with this view.

It is impossible to define religion in a way that includes all the thought systems that these people want to include, or exclude those that they want to exclude. For example, if I define religion as "the service or worship of God or the supernatural,"[11] then this may exclude some forms of Buddhism. But those who say that all religions are essentially the same usually want to include Buddhism.

If I change my definition to, "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith,"[12] it should be broad enough to include Buddhism, but then I cannot exclude communism. Another dictionary offers a similar definition: "any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values, etc.,"[13] and with this gives humanism as an example. But if we include communism and humanism as religions, then we must also include totalitarianism and democracy. However, communism, totalitarianism, and democracy are not essentially the same. And these are not essentially the same with Buddhism and Christianity.

These are only examples from the dictionaries. Although texts on the philosophy of religion are more detailed in their attempts to define religion, their efforts fail to overcome the difficulties illustrated. No matter how our opponents define religion, the definition is either going to be too broad or too narrow for their purpose. It would either include certain systems that they want to exclude, or it would exclude certain systems that they want to include. The difficulty exists because the various religions are not similar. They contradict one another on many essential points. The implication is that not all of them can be correct, and thus it is impossible to unite them.[14]

Since Christianity claims to be the only true worldview, then if it is indeed a true worldview, its claim to be the only true worldview would also be true, and all other worldviews would be false. But this also means that if any non-Christian worldview is true, then Christianity is false. Therefore, any adherent to a non-Christian worldview must face the Christian faith and defeat it, and any Christian must attack and demolish the non-Christian worldview. It is irrational and dishonest to pretend that the worldviews are in essential agreement when they are in essential disagreement.

When people say that all religions are essentially the same, they are either completely delusional, as is often the case, or they are delusional but also foolishly focusing on some non-foundational aspect of the religions, or an aspect that is foundational to some, but not foundational to others. But then they are not comparing the essential points of the religions.

For example, if the claim is that all religions are essentially the same because they all teach people to strive toward goodness, my objection would be that ethics is not the foundation of the biblical worldview, even if it is an important aspect. Christian ethics is founded on Christian metaphysics; that is, what the Bible teaches about morality depends on what the Bible teaches about reality. Without the biblical view of reality, there is no foundation for the biblical view of morality.

Therefore, the biblical view of reality is the more essential aspect of the Christian worldview. However, in the list of worldviews usually included by those who say that all religions are essentially the same, we find various different and contradictory views of reality. Some affirm monotheism, others affirm polytheism and pantheism. Some affirm naturalistic atheism.

Thus to say that both Buddhism and Christianity teach people to be good does not establish any essential similarity between the two systems, but it merely attempts to hide the obvious essential differences. Christianity affirms as its essential claims that God is a Trinity, that Christ is both God and man, and that Scripture is infallible. There are others, but these three beliefs are enough to exclude all non-Christian systems, and to establish that Christianity is essentially contradictory to all non-Christian worldviews, including Judaism.[15]

Many of those who say that all religions are essentially the same tend to emphasize what they perceive as similarities in the area of ethics. This approach

is mistaken, because as mentioned, different religions may construct their ethics upon different views of metaphysics, which to them is more foundational. One cannot dictate to all the religions what is or what is not essential to them. We must allow each religion to specify its central claims. If I say that monotheism is foundational to my religion, then you cannot say that it is not foundational to my religion just because you wish to select my foundational claims to accommodate your theory. In fact, even if the two systems of ethics are identical, it would be wrong to say that my monotheistic religion is essentially the same with another person's polytheistic religion.

That said, Christian and non-Christian ethics are not identical. They are not even similar. You may say that all religions direct people to walk in love and goodness. First, this is not true. The ethical aims and directives of various religions are often very different. Second, how do you define love and goodness? The Bible says that love is the summary and fulfillment of God's laws (Romans 13:8-10), so that if you walk in love, you will obey the Bible's commands. But if a non-Christian religion has a different definition of love, then whatever it calls love is not what the Bible calls love. And given the Bible's definition of love, a non-Christian religion must by definition have a different definition of love. We can raise similar points regarding goodness, justice, humility, and all other moral terms. Since there is no common concept of love, goodness, justice, and so on, it is unintelligible to say that the Christian and non-Christian religions are similar because they strive after these things.

The very first of the Ten Commandments demands exclusive worship of the Christian God. Therefore, from a Christian viewpoint, it is immoral to be a non-Christian. Who are you to say that this is not an essential belief in Christianity? It is more essential than the commandment against murder, since the commandment against murder is founded upon this exclusive authority of God. Unless all religions have as their essential belief that they are to worship only the Christian God, then they are not the same with Christianity.

Under both democracy and communism, it is possible to affirm that there are such things as red roses, but this does not mean that democracy and communism are the same, or even similar to each other, because they differ on the essential points. Those who attempt to unite all religions choose certain points that they think are common to all religions, and then take it upon themselves to call these points the essential points. But they have no right to dictate the essential points for all religions, and even on those things that they think all religions agree, the

various religions in fact do not agree. The truth is that the various religions are different, and they contradict one another on numerous essential and non-essential issues. Therefore, not all religions are true. Christianity declares that all non-Christian religions are false, and as we show that Christianity is true, then we show that this pronouncement about all non-Christian religions is also true, and thus we show that all non-Christian religions are false.

This biblical and exclusive view is unpopular today, even among those who claim to be Christians. But popularity does not indicate whether a belief is true or false. A common objection against exclusive religion is that it is arrogant to say that my position is the only correct one, and that all who disagree with me are wrong. But what is your definition of arrogance? If the Christian faith declares that I must accept it to be the only true religion and consider all non-Christian religions to be false, then under the Christian faith I am not arrogant to take this position. You can call me arrogant only based on a non-Christian standard. Thus you must defend the non-Christian worldview by which you call me arrogant and you must refute the Christian worldview. If you fail to do this, then you have no rational basis to call me arrogant.

Moreover, the claim that there is not one exclusively true religion is itself a universal judgment about all religions, thus you are imposing your own view on all religions, and you are saying that not one of them may claim to be exclusively true. You are saying that only your view about the various religions is correct (that no one religion is exclusively true), and that all who disagree with you on this are mistaken. This is supreme arrogance according to your own standard.

I could offer a similar response to the charge that it is narrow-minded to say that only my view is correct, and all who disagree with me are wrong. Why is it bad to be narrow-minded? By what standard can you call me narrow-minded, and determine that it is wrong to be narrow-minded? If Christianity is indeed exclusively true, then it is good to be narrow-minded. If only Christianity is true, then it would be good to believe that only Christianity is true, whether or not you call that narrow-minded. If Christianity is exclusively true, and you remain open-minded about the issue, then you are not affirming the truth. You are the one who has a problem.

People make accusations of arrogance, narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and the like, as a tactic to avoid the real issues, and to avoid confronting the arguments that

have been offered. Is the Christian faith exclusively true or not? If not, there is no need to call me arrogant – refute me, and that will be the end of it. If you disagree that the Christian faith is the only true religion, and that all non-Christians will be condemned to endless torment in hell, all you have to do is to confront the Christian arguments and refute them.

Christian writers who agree that only the Christian faith is true are nevertheless often reluctant to bluntly state this fact. And they are reluctant to state its implication, that if only the Christian faith is true, then all non-Christian religions are false. They grudgingly affirm the exclusivity of the Christian faith, as if they resent God for declaring such a thing. This attitude must be condemned. Instead, they must embrace and defend the words of Scripture with eagerness. Anything less indicates an evil empathy for false religions and sinful humanity at the expense of faithfulness to Christ.

If you claim to be a Christian, then you are also saying that all non-Christian religions are false, and that all non-Christians will be condemned to endless torment in hell. If you have a problem with this, or hesitate even a little, then you should examine yourself to see if you truly believe in Christ. For if you disagree with Christ, then you have no basis to claim to be a Christian. Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). If you are not a Christian, then you are not only non-Christian in your beliefs, but you are anti-Christian.

In the church, anyone who embraces religious pluralism and the truth of non-Christian religions or worldviews should have the implications shown to him. The church should explain what the Bible teaches on the subject. If the person refuses to repent and change his mind, then he should be condemned and expelled from the church. False doctrine is much more sinister and destructive than something like murder or adultery. We must protect the congregation by removing those who insist on affirming unbiblical ideas: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). The church is weak today because of a lack of swift discipline.

Since the truth of the Christian faith has been defended elsewhere,[16] and since the absurdity of the unity of religions has been demonstrated, we proceed with the assumption of the exclusive truth of Christianity and the falsehood of all non-Christian religions. Thus we return to our initial statement, that only Christians may offer prayers that are acceptable to God.

For one's prayer to be acceptable, he must have a right relationship with God, but to have a right relationship with God, he must first have a right relationship with the mediator between God and man. The only mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. We refer to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son who took upon himself human nature, who died for his people and then rose from the dead. You cannot be a Muslim or Buddhist and say that you are praying through Christ. You cannot say that you are a Mormon or Hindu, but that you are praying through Christ as long as you pray with a sincere attitude. You cannot say that Christ is the mediator of all these religions. The Bible demands that you confess and worship the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He is both God and man, and the sole mediator between God and man. He is the only way to God. All other roads lead to hellfire.

Some heretics claim that saints and angels act as mediators between God and man, so that they appeal to someone like Mary, the mother of Jesus, for help and for intercession. This is a blatant rejection of the Christian faith. The Bible declares that there is only one mediator, not two or three, or three hundred. There is only one. There is no access to God except through Jesus Christ. He is the mediator between God and man, but he does not offer all men and women access to God. Rather, through him only Christians have access to God the Father in prayer and worship.

[8] As for conversion, God is the one who initiates and causes it. He fills the chosen one with faith and moves him to confess Jesus Christ. Thus it is not as if a non-Christian has access to God, so that he can reach out and ask to become a Christian. Rather, when one sincerely calls out to God and confesses Jesus Christ, God is the one who has already chosen him and who now changes him into a Christian.
[9] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, for an exposition on the doctrines of election and reprobation.
[10] See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Captive to Reason*, and *Apologetics in Conversation*.
[11] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; "religion."
[12] Ibid.
[13] *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*; "religion."
[14] Someone said to me that she thought religion was about unity, and she meant the unity of the human race. But the Tower of Babel was about human unity, and God stopped it. No, religion is not about unity, or at least Christianity is not about unity. Christianity is about revealed truth, and if people would affirm the truth and unite around it, then all the better.
[15] Christianity does not contradict the Old Testament, but it contradicts Judaism. Although we can find the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ in the Old Testament, Judaism denies both. Those who were saved before Christ came were also saved by Christ alone (see John 8:56; Hebrews 11:26). Our contention is that Judaism does not follow the Old Testament. Rather, the whole Bible – Old and New Testaments – is a Christian book, and only a Christian book. It endorses no other worldview or religion.
[16] See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Captive to Reason*, and *Apologetics in Conversation*.

# 3. PRAYING BY THE SPIRIT

**For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. (Ephesians 2:18)**

The Bible teaches that we must pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. But not everyone can pray to the Father, because not everyone has the Son (1 John 5:12), and not everyone has the Spirit (Romans 8:9). It is important to understand the relationship between prayer and the exclusivity of the Christian faith, because if not everyone has access to God, then one who comes to God in prayer should possess a sense of what he is and who he is before God. Is this person an enemy of God, or has God changed his heart and given him faith to embrace the gospel?

The exclusivity of the Christian faith continues to be relevant for the Christian, because he ought to retain an appreciation that he has been chosen to approach God: "Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts" (Psalm 65:4, NKJV). Instead of thinking that God should thank the man for believing the gospel, the man should develop his new life "in fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12-13), knowing that he is permitted in God's presence solely because of God's pleasure and discretion.

The Christian had done nothing to deserve salvation, and in himself he was no better than the non-Christian, who would be condemned to endless suffering in hell. The Christian can say nothing to exalt himself. Although God has now made him intellectually superior to the non-Christian, he cannot say that he had the good sense in himself to choose Christ, since Christ says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). And although God has now made him ethically superior to the non-Christian, he cannot say that he had the moral sense in himself to side with the truth, since the Bible declares, "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). So he who boasts cannot boast about himself, but he must boast about what God has done for him through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:31).

Before a man becomes a Christian, he is not intellectually and ethically superior to the non-Christian, since he is himself a non-Christian, entirely stupid and sinful. But when God converts him and turns him into a Christian, the man is

filled with faith and life, and he becomes so intellectually and ethically superior to the non-Christian that the Bible refers to one as light and the other as darkness. Those who claim to be Christians often deny this because of unbelief, ignorance, and false humility, but the Bible teaches that Christ has been made our wisdom and righteousness, and as we continue to grow in Christ, we increase in knowledge and holiness. Therefore, to deny the Christian's intellectual and ethical superiority is also to blaspheme Jesus Christ and to spurn his work of redemption. Then, in contrast, the Bible calls non-Christians stupid and evil. Thus to deny the non-Christian's utter inferiority is to reject the inerrancy of Scripture and to disown the Christian faith.

If you do not have superior intelligence, as God defines intelligence, then you have not been enlightened. If you do not have superior character, as God defines character, then you have not been transformed. Therefore, if you are not intellectually and ethically superior to the non-Christians, then God has not done any work in you, and you are not even a Christian. If you are intellectually and ethically like the non-Christians, then you are heading to hell just as much as the non-Christians.

The Holy Spirit enables Christians to approach God in prayer through Jesus Christ. He also intercedes for us:

> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

Some of the Greeks considered the human limitations in prayer and inferred certain conclusions from them. For example, "Pythagoras forbade his disciples to pray for themselves, because, he said, they could never in their ignorance know what was expedient for them. Xenophon tells us that Socrates taught his disciples simply to pray for good things, and not to attempt to specify them, but to leave God to decide what the good things were."[17]

God does not leave the Christian in such a pathetic condition, since through the Bible he has revealed a considerable amount of information about his decrees and precepts, so that we can possess much understanding, and we can make

accurate judgments about our needs and circumstances. The Bible is sufficient for our lives. Suppose one has complete knowledge of the Bible, and suppose he fully follows what it teaches, he would never transgress the will of God. Of course, because no one has reached perfection, no one has complete knowledge of the Bible, and no one fully follows it, and we must often ask God for forgiveness. Still, the Bible is sufficient in itself, so that when we fail to live a perfect life before God, it is never because the Bible lacks the necessary information (2 Peter 1:3).

That said, since we often do not know very much even about our own situations, and since we do not know about all the relationships between various events and options, we sometimes do not know how best to pray. We may know what we want when it comes to our personal lives, but even then we may not know whether what we want is always best, or whether it conforms to the plan that God has for our lives. This is just to say that we are not omniscient, and not that the Bible offers insufficient information. Failing to know everything is not a sin, but there remains the practical problem of not knowing how best to pray. It is not an issue of lacking the necessary information to achieve holiness, since the Bible is indeed sufficient, but it is an issue of practical helplessness because of our human limitations.

The Holy Spirit helps us. Paul writes, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." What does this mean?

First, we need to consider what is meant by "groans *that words cannot express*." It is impossible that these "groans" represent thoughts that are inexpressible by words. Since words are arbitrary signs, they are capable of expressing any thought. "X" can be a word that represents any thought. No matter how profound a thought is, if a mind can think it, then words can express it. In fact, "X" can designate an entire proposition or even all the propositions in an entire book. Thus words are always adequate to express any thought.

If the "groans" are not thoughts, and if they are not meant to produce thoughts in another mind, then they are not meant as vehicles of expression, and thus it would be unintelligible to say that they "cannot" be expressed in words. Anything that can be expressed must either be thoughts, or must generate thoughts in another mind; otherwise, the idea of expression is inapplicable. Thus the verse cannot mean that some thoughts cannot be expressed in words, since all thoughts can be expressed in words. It cannot mean that language itself is

deficient. At best the verse suggests that we might not have the intellectual insight to translate these groans into words. In any case, any limitation in expression must be in the mind, and not in language itself.

Douglas Moo points out that the term translated "that words cannot express" in the NIV appears only here in biblical Greek, and the meaning implied by its etymology is more properly denoted by, "unspoken" or "wordless."[18] Likewise, Thomas Schreiner writes, "it much more likely means 'without speech,' the absence of any vocalization at all."[19] Whatever the "groans" are, they are not thoughts that are meant to be spoken; therefore, the verse does not suggest that there are inherent limitations in language itself in giving expression to thoughts.

The context indicates that these groans are metaphorical, and not literal or audible sounds:

> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole *creation has been groaning* as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, *groan inwardly* as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:18-23)

Paul describes the tension and frustration that we experience as we live in the imperfect present while expecting the perfect future. We long for the completion of our salvation, including "the redemption of our bodies." Thus our "groaning" is not an audible sort, but a metaphor for our tension and frustration. This becomes even more obvious when we see that the creation shares this tension and frustration, and that it "has been groaning" along with us. The creation is not a rational entity, and does not literally groan as a woman suffering "the pains of childbirth." Therefore, the "groaning" in these verses represents an intense anticipation for the fulfillment of the plan of God, instead of an audible sound.

Paul writes that the Spirit also groans for the will of God to be fulfilled. Verse 26 says, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself *intercedes for us* with groans that words cannot express." Since we do not always know what we ought to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us with "groans" that are not audibly uttered. But what does this mean? What is the nature and mode of this intercession?

Schreiner writes:

> These groanings are not audible. They are the inexpressible longings that arise in every believer's heart to do and know the will of God. That the groanings arise *in the hearts of believers* is suggested by verse 27, which says that "God searches the hearts." This is most naturally understood to refer to the hearts of believers. God searches the hearts of believers and finds unutterable longings to conform their lives to the will of God. The Holy Spirit takes these groanings and presents them before God in an articulate form. Even though believers cannot specify these requests to God adequately since they do not know his will sufficiently, the Holy Spirit translates these groanings and conforms them to God's will.[20]

The passage indeed implies that believers "do not know his will sufficiently," and it says that the Holy Spirit does something about it, and this is related to the "groans" mentioned. However, Schreiner is mistaken when he says that these groans are "in the hearts of believers" in the sense that these are the groans of the believers, which the Spirit transforms into acceptable prayers to God.

According to Schreiner, verse 27 suggests that the groans are in the hearts of the believers because it says that "God searches the hearts." Although the "hearts" are the hearts of the believers, the verse does not support his conclusion. The entire verse says, "And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." The words, "he who searches the hearts" merely identify which "he" we are talking about. The verse continues and tells us what "he who searches the hearts" actually does – he "knows the mind of the Spirit." Now, verse 26 says that the Spirit "intercedes for us," and verse 27 says that the Spirit "intercedes for the saints," so that it is the Spirit's prayer that God hears in this passage, and not that of the believers.

Keeping in mind the context of this passage, we paraphrase as follows: "We do not always know for what to pray, but the Spirit prays for us inaudibly. Now, he who knows our thoughts also knows the Spirit's thoughts; therefore, although the Spirit prays inaudibly, God hears the Spirit's prayers for us. And such prayers are effective, since the Spirit prays for us in accordance with the will of God." Paul refers to God as the one "who searches our hearts" probably because the Spirit is one who dwells in our hearts, so that Paul seems to say, in effect, "He who knows your thoughts also knows the thoughts of the Spirit who lives in you."

Douglas Moo advances a similar conclusion. He writes:

> Moreover, it is likely that the groans are not the believer's but the Spirit's….it is preferable to understand these "groans" as the Spirit's own "language of prayer," a ministry of intercession that takes place in our hearts in a manner *imperceptible to us*. This means, of course, that "groans" is used metaphorically….I take it that Paul is saying, then, that our failure to know God's will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God's Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God….
>
> Verse 27 continues Paul's discussion of the intercession of the Spirit and focuses on the effectiveness of this intercession. The reason for this effectiveness is the perfect accord that exists between God, "the one who searches hearts," and "the mind of the Spirit." God, who sees into the inner being of people, where the indwelling Spirit's ministry of intercession takes place, "knows," "acknowledges," and responds to those "intentions" of the Spirit that are expressed in his prayers on our behalf.[21]

Some preachers maintain that our passage does not teach that the Spirit prays for us, but that the Spirit helps us to pray. They say that the Spirit will not do something for you that you are supposed to do yourself, although he will help you do it. However, it begs the question to say that this passage does not teach that the Spirit prays for us because it cannot be true that the Spirit prays for us. Rather, since this passage indeed teaches that the Spirit prays for us, it means

that it is true that the Spirit prays for us.

Hebrews 7:25 indicates that Jesus Christ "always lives to intercede" for believers. He has a ministry of intercession in which he prays for believers, and this ministry occurs independently of the believers themselves. In addition, it occurs in heaven, so that it is indeed "imperceptible to us." Our passage is telling us that the Holy Spirit also has a ministry of intercession in which he prays for believers, and that this occurs independently of the believers themselves, so that it is also "imperceptible to us."

The same preachers would teach that Christ is interceding for us, and they find no conflict between this ministry of intercession and our responsibility to pray. If we can acknowledge that Christ prays for us, then it is irrational to insist that the Spirit cannot also pray for us, especially when our passage explicitly teaches this. Christ prays, the Spirit prays, and we pray – there is no conflict.

Jesus refers to the Spirit as "another Counselor" (John 14:16, or "Advocate"). The fact that the Spirit has a ministry of intercession for believers fits very well with his ministry as the second Advocate, and parallels the ministry of Christ as the first Advocate. Christ now serves as our Advocate in heaven, and the Spirit now serves as the indwelling Advocate on earth. Both of them pray for us.

Just as the fact that Jesus Christ has a ministry of intercession does not prevent or discourage us from praying, the fact that the Spirit also has a ministry of intercession should not prevent or discourage us from praying. It is true that the Spirit helps us pray, but our passage is referring to something else, that the Spirit himself prays to God for us, and since his prayers are always in accordance with the will of God, they are always effective.

Another interpretation of our passage is that the "groans that words cannot express" refer to speaking in tongues. Since we do not always know for what to pray, the Spirit grants us words to speak in a language that we do not understand so as to bypass the limitations of our minds. This is an invaluable blessing. However, it seems impossible that this passage refers to speaking in tongues. Here it is the Spirit who prays in inaudible "groans" in a manner that is independent from believers and imperceptible to them, and speaking in tongues cannot fit into this. Although the Bible encourages speaking in tongues, this passage does not seem to have tongues in mind.

Even if you have the advantage of praying in tongues, you must still strive to become fluent in praying with your understanding, in a language that you understand. As Peter Kreeft writes, "The first cause of a specifically human act is always internal, not external. By 'a specifically human act' I mean one like asking a question, creating a work of art, making a moral choice, affirming another person, or appreciating the beauty of nature – or praying….That is why thought is where the action starts….Thought is the first battlefield."[22]

Although spiritual growth involves much effort and much struggle, if we have some sense of direction and purpose, and if we know what to work on, then the effort and the struggle will bear fruit. The struggle in prayer should not consist in forcing yourself to pray when you cannot pray well, but it should focus on developing a spiritual mind by reading and thinking. If you wish to pray better, then you must make your thoughts richer and clearer. Thus the most important thing you can do to improve in prayer is theological reflection, and this entails much reading and thinking. You will not be able to engage God's attributes in prayer and worship if you do not know about them. You will not be able to express thanks to Christ or to address some matter of concern on the basis of his sacrifice if you are ignorant in this area. All meaningful spiritual exercises depend on theological knowledge. Therefore, a volume on theology does much more to improve your prayer life than one that focuses on prayer, especially when the latter is mainly pragmatic, anecdotal, and theologically shallow.

Jesus would sometimes spend a whole night in prayer, from evening to morning (Luke 6:12). His thinking was rich and his knowledge was broad. We cannot attain to his level, but we can continue to improve. The Spirit is involved in all of this – it is he who grants us knowledge and understanding, who causes us to recall and obey the words of God, and who transforms our thinking and our character through Scripture. Although our passage does not stress the Spirit's role in helping us pray, but instead indicates that the Spirit prays for us, there are other biblical passages to assure us that he is here to help us in every aspect of our spiritual life, including our struggle to improve in prayer by establishing a foundation of greater knowledge and deeper reflection about the things of God.

Paul has been telling us about the Spirit's ministry of intercession. Because the Spirit always prays "in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8:27), his prayers are always effective. Verse 28 then describes the result of such an effective ministry: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

We must define "good" the way God defines it, and not the way the flesh would like to define it. Paul is instilling in his readers a proper perspective to interpret the things that we suffer in this life. He says in verse 18, "I consider that *our present sufferings* are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." So when verse 28 says that "all things work together for the good," the "all things" should really include "all things." In fact, Romans 9 indicates that even the creation and damnation of the reprobates serve to honor God and educate the Christians.

Romans 8:28 mainly refers to the things that we suffer. Most people assume this, but they would still misunderstand if they assume a false definition of "good." For example, the verse cannot mean, "All things, whether good or bad, work together for your good – that is, to make you rich." The "good" in our verse cannot mean material riches because that is not how God defines "good." Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). And the verse cannot mean, "All things, whether good or bad, work together for your good – that is, to make you popular," because that is not how God defines "good."

The answer is in verse 29. It says that God has predestined us to be "conformed to the likeness of his Son." God defines the "good" in verse 28 as that which functions to further our sanctification. We sometimes fail to focus on the spiritual, but God is always concerned with it, and he works all things – even the lives of others and the destinies of nations – to effect our sanctification. "It is God's will that you should be sanctified…For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7).

This does not mean that God withholds pleasant things. While Paul admonishes the wealthy, he writes that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). So the teaching is not that God gives us only pleasant things or unpleasant things, or that only certain things further our sanctification, but it is that *all things* work together by the providence and wisdom of God to further the great purpose of our sanctification, and this refers to our increase in knowledge and in holiness (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24).

We return again to the exclusivity of the Christian faith, for all things work together for good, not for everyone, but only for "those who love God" (v. 28). Paul writes, "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (1

Corinthians 16:22). We have seen that the wrath of God remains on non-Christians, and there is no escape from judgment except through Jesus Christ.

Who are "those who love God"? Are they those who have chosen Christ by their own "free will"? Are they those who have the intellectual sense and ethical propensity to embrace the Christian faith? The Bible insists that God is sovereign, that man has no free will, and that no one can choose God unless God has first chosen him. So the verse says that those who love God are those "who have been called according to his purpose." It does not say that they are those who love God because they have chosen to love him according to their own reasons, but that they love God because they have been chosen by God according to God's own purpose. Those who loved God are those who have been "summoned by preference."[23]

All other individuals have been created and chosen for damnation. They will be "thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:6). God's plan is that they would produce an environment in which the chosen ones would strive in faith and increase in sanctification, and that they would promote the glory of God by their final judgment and suffering in hellfire. The lives of reprobates have no positive meaning for themselves. People are appalled and outraged at such a God who is sovereign, and who dares to exercise his sovereignty, but "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (Romans 9:21).

[17] William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans (The Daily Study Bible Series)*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 112.
[18] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996; p. 524.
[19] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*; Baker Books, 1998; p. 445.
[20] Schreiner, p. 446.
[21] Moo, p. 526-527.
[22] Peter Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*; Ignatius Press, 2000; p. 38-41.
[23] Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; North Point Press, 1996; p. 343.

# PRAYER AND THE DIVINE NATURE

God is defined by the sum of his attributes. Some of these attributes are his sovereignty, knowledge, and transcendence – God is all-powerful, God is all-knowing, and God is spirit. Stephen Charnock is credited as having said, "It is impossible to honor God as we ought, unless we know him as he is."[24] Accordingly, there is an intimate relationship between prayer and the divine attributes.

Suppose you have been invited to make a speech at a banquet honoring a distinguished professor. Now, if you think that the professor is a man when she is a woman, if you think that her field is physics when it is history, and if you think that she comes from Texas when she is from India, then your speech is not going to make much sense, and both the professor and the audience would think that your speech is referring to someone else.

Many people pray to "God," but if they were to describe him, what we hear may not correspond at all to the God of the Bible. If their "God" is different from the one described in the Bible, then they are not praying to God at all, and they are not Christians. The Israelites turned to an idol they had made and declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). But God disagreed, and he slaughtered many of them.

If your "God" is in fact something that you have made, a representation of deity that you have constructed to please yourself, then you are not a Christian. You are an idol worshiper. You can claim that you are a Christian, but you are a liar. Then, even if your idea of God seems to be correct, if your "Jesus" is different from the one described in the Bible, you are still not a Christian, and you are still heading toward hell.

Therefore, it is absurd to complain that theology is unimportant or impractical. In fact, theology is the most important factor in the Christian life and the foundation for dealing with all practical issues. Theology is the prerequisite for all spiritual activities. People say that if you want to know God, then you should pray. No! If you do not know something about God first, then you cannot pray. If you do not have at least a minimal but biblical understanding about God,[25] then you may be praying to an entity produced by your own imagination instead of the true God. This is idolatry. You could be damned to hell for it. Thus if you

want to know God, study the Bible, and pray to the God of the Bible.

Christians know something about the attributes of God, but often fail to pray as if these attributes are true of God. They would not dare to explicitly deny the attributes of God, but they implicitly deny them when they pray. They must correct this, or their prayers would continue to displease and dishonor God. For example, God's omniscience produces a number of implications for prayer, and we must pray as if God is omniscient, because he really is omniscient. A prayer that assumes or implies that God is weak, foolish, and local is a prayer that blasphemes God instead of glorifies him.

[24] Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*; Baker Books, 2000 (original: 1853).
[25] One should know enough about God so as to distinguish the Christian God from all other gods, and to distinguish the Christian faith from all other religions.

# 4. PRAYER AND SOVEREIGNTY

**I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)**

Christian ministers sometimes tell people, "God needs you." The context may be an exhortation to dedication in prayer, evangelism, charity, service, or some other activity that would advance the kingdom of God. However, the statement is unbiblical and blasphemous. We must never declare that God needs us.

As he confronts the philosophers of Athens, Paul state, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24-25). For a minister to say, "God needs you," or anything to that effect, is a direct contradiction of Scripture. It is a blatant defiance of what God says about himself. God is self-sufficient and all-sufficient. We need him for everything, but he does not need us for anything.

The ministers tell their congregations that God needs them in order to motivate them. The assumption is that God's commands are more meaningful if he actually needs the people to help him. Thus these ministers think of God as a finite being, and they want their people to think of God this way. But then they are no longer worshiping the Christian God, the God of the Bible, and this happens perhaps because they are not Christians in the first place. They are in the position of the heathens that Paul tried to correct. Of course we should obey God's commands, but we should not base our motivation on the blasphemous notion that God needs us to obey his commands or his purposes would fall apart.

Since God commands us to pray, it is sinful to neglect to pray, but this does not mean that our failure to pray will hinder his plans. He does not need us to pray. He has not bound himself to a way of interacting with his creation such that he would or could act only when certain conditions are met on the human side. Some have gone as far as to say that God has given dominion to man, so that God would or could intervene only if man grants permission for God to do so. This is heresy. The Bible testifies that God controls all things, including the thinking and behavior of all humans and demons. He sends even evil spirits to

do his bidding, and he gives to or takes from his creatures whatever he pleases, whenever and however he pleases.

God possesses absolute sovereignty. He determines all things, and he carries out what he determines by his omnipotence. He often chooses to use means to accomplish his ends, and his means often involve men and women, their works, and their prayers. Nevertheless, he does not bind himself to use these means or any means at all in accomplishing his plans. In addition, the means by which he accomplishes his ends do not work autonomously, but they are themselves immediately and continuously propelled by his power, so that nothing in creation escapes his attention and control.

This means that prayer never actually or directly changes anything, although when we speak on a human level, it is fine to say that a command of faith can move a mountain (Mark 11:23) and that the prayer of faith can heal the sick (James 5:15). We may say that a Christian preached the gospel to someone and convinced him to believe in Jesus Christ, but when our focus is on the cause, or the metaphysical or ontological explanation of the event, then we must say that God is the one who caused the Christian to preach and the one who caused the hearer to believe. He is the only real cause of any action or event. God is the one who exercises his omnipotence to change things; the human act of prayer in itself changes nothing. God is not changed by prayer, since he is immutable in all his attributes and decrees, and he has determined in eternity all that he will do and all that will occur. In fact, he is the one who causes our prayers, and who causes the changes that correlate with our prayers. He is the doer of all things.

To the careless and unlearned reader, some biblical passages appear to say that our prayers can change God's mind. For example, after the Israelites had sinned by worshiping the golden calf, God said to Moses, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). But after Moses interceded for the people (v. 11-13), verse 14 says, "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." Therefore, it appears that God changed his mind in response to the intercession.

However, this interpretation contradicts what God has revealed about himself: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19); "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind;

for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." (1 Samuel 15:29). Since God himself claims that he does not change his mind, the interpretation that God does change his mind must be false.

We can arrive at the same conclusion even from Exodus, and show that God does not change his mind. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:10, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his." This was a prediction of the Messiah's lineage, and found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Then, God says in Exodus 32:10 that he would destroy the Israelites and raise up a new nation through Moses, but Moses came from Levi, not Judah. Thus God never planned to raise up a new nation through Moses, and only several verses later, it turned out that he did not have to.

This does not mean that God lied to Moses in Exodus 32:10, since if Moses had not interceded, God could have carried out his verdict and destroyed the Israelites. However, the fact that Jacob had made that prediction in Genesis 49:10 meant that there was no possibility that God would have carried out Exodus 32:10; therefore, unless God had chosen some other way to prevent carrying out Exodus 32:10, he had already determined that Moses would intercede, and there was no possibility that Moses would not have interceded. W. Bingham Hunter's explanation is correct: "My conviction is that references to God's 'repenting,' 'relenting' or 'changing his mind' in Scripture are figures of speech; technically speaking, they are anthropopathisms – expressions which explain God in terms usually used to describe human emotions."[26]

God is sovereign. He determines and controls everything. Since this is true, it follows that a person's prayer has also been determined by God. If it appears that God is responding to a prayer, it is because God has decided that he would act by means of this prayer, and this prayer has been determined and caused by him to occur. Thus prayer itself does not change things, and it does not change God. From God's perspective, prayer is an effect that he causes, which he may correlate with other effects that he also causes. Prayer itself is not a cause that causes God to act; rather, the person who prays does so because God is acting on him and causing him to pray.

Many people seem to think that, "In prayer a human being seeks to assert self-will over the will of God."[27] Stanley Grenz observes, "Some Christians fail to see this conflict as in any way problematic. They readily admit adhering to

exactly this understanding of prayer. Certain evangelical and charismatic circles describe prayer as a technique for bending the divine will."[28] These have an entirely distorted view of God and the Christian faith. We must condemn the notion that prayer is "for bending the divine will." Instead, our idea of prayer must correspond to the reality that the divine will is rigid and fixed, so that nothing can bend it, and no one can change it. Prayer is meaningful because "God has decided to include humans in the divine program for the world,"[29] and not because he needs our request or permission to act.

Therefore, we must think of prayer not as something that changes the will of God, but we must think about it another way. A biblical view of prayer would regard it as one possible means in the process by which God gives us what he wants us to receive, or by which he achieves some purpose of his. Thus he may cause us to pray as part of his plan to grant us material goods or as part of the process to effect our sanctification.

This is the correct position because it is what the Bible teaches, and it is consistent with and necessitated by other biblical doctrines. A view of prayer may appear to be derived from several isolated biblical passages, but if it contradicts the divine attributes or other biblical doctrines, then it must not be a biblical view of prayer, and those biblical passages must have been mishandled.

Failing to observe this, some people have derived definitions and principles on prayer that they consider meaningful, but when they have formulated their doctrine, there is no room left for the God of the Bible in their theology of prayer. They end up with the kind of prayer that they like, but not the kind of God that the Bible teaches. They have their prayer, but no God to answer their prayer. This is the case with a doctrine of prayer that affirms God would change his mind in response to our petitions, or that God could act in creation only in response to our requests.

We must always think, speak, and pray as if God is sovereign, because he is indeed sovereign. God's sovereignty seems to threaten the meaningfulness of prayer only when we hold to the ridiculous notion that the meaningfulness of prayer depends on some weakness or deficiency in him. Rather, God's sovereignty establishes the meaningfulness of prayer, because he has chosen it as one of the means by which he accomplishes his plans. God's sovereignty also implies that we should never assume that all is lost due to a failure to pray. Although we must repent of our negligence and correct the problem, we must

also admit that the fate of the universe does not depend on us. God holds all the power, and he will perform all his will.

[26] W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*; InterVarsity Press, 1986; p. 52.
[27] Stanley J. Grenz, *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom*; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988; p. 32.
[28] Ibid., p. 32.
[29] Ibid., p. 44.

# 5. PRAYER AND OMNISCIENCE

**And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)**

God has exhaustive knowledge of all things. He knows all bout our past, present, and future. He knows all of our thoughts and actions. He is omniscient. The Bible repeatedly reminds us of this divine attribute. We must never forget it, or act in a way that is inconsistent with it. Since God is omniscient, then we should think and act in a way that reflects our acknowledgment of this divine attribute.

Some people think that God will hear them because their prayers are lengthy and repetitious. Followers of non-Christians either pray to nothing or to demons, and their prayers often consist of monotonous chants or prescribed scripts that are recited again and again without thought. Jesus condemns such prayers on the basis that God is omniscient. He tells us not to pray like these pagans because God already knows what we need before we ask him.

Once I was on a telephone conference with several people who regularly called in for spiritual discussion. One of them hijacked the conference and began to pray…and pray…and pray. Much of it was repetitious, unbiblical, and pious-sounding mystical nonsense. So I lost interest and put down the phone to make myself a cup of coffee. Then, I went to my desk and tidied it up a little. When I picked up the phone, she was still praying, and it sounded just the same.

She must have prayed for twenty minutes. No public prayer should last twenty minutes unless there is some exceptional reason or a prior agreement. Even then it would most likely be destructive, since given the unbelief and foolishness that fill people's prayers nowadays, it would just be twenty minutes of wasted time. Instead of something that God would answer or that offer edification, it would be something that the people need to recover from. Nevertheless, if we are assured that the entire prayer would be filled with faith and wisdom, without needless repetition or any stupid behavior or characteristic, then perhaps an even longer prayer is justified. And of course, it would be better to call it a sermon.

The woman had formed some poor prayer habits. But more than that, it was

evident that she wanted to dominate the conference, and to gain the attention and approval of other participants. She wanted to make a show of her spirituality and enthusiasm for the things of God, which her unbearable prayer in fact contradicted. She produced only annoyance and exasperation. But if she managed to impress others that night, then according to Jesus, that was all the reward she was granted. The prayer itself was not answered. God was not impressed with her.

If you are like this woman, you need to stop it. You need to shut your mouth. You are not spiritual, and you do not know God. You are praying like the pagans. You are treating God as the pagans treat their deities, who are not gods at all. The only reward you have is the admiration of gullible people who are deceived by your false piety. But mature and spiritual believers are disgusted by your shameful display. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." God welcomes his people, and you may pray as long as you wish if you continue to have something meaningful to say. But leave out the nonsense.

We must reflect our belief in the divine attributes in all that we think and do. Pray as if God is omniscient because God is indeed omniscient. God knows our thoughts, desires, and circumstances; therefore, when we pray, we do not need to repeat ourselves in chant-like fashion or make the prayer as long as possible and continue even if we have finished our petition. There is no need for a detailed description of the situation, or for elaborate arguments on why God should answer. He already knows.

There is a teaching that we should be highly specific in our prayers all the time. Instead of asking God for wisdom, we should ask him to enlighten us on the particular aspects of a subject that we wish to understand. Instead of asking him for prosperity, we should ask him to provide us a certain amount of money, and preferably referring to a particular opportunity through which it may come. Instead of asking for a spouse, we should ask him to send one who possesses the exact characteristics that we specify.

However, this teaching is unbiblical, especially when one insists that all prayers must be specific, and that the level of specificity must be very high. Some of the prayers in the Bible are specific, but never extremely so, and many are very general, even when they are directed toward clear and specific needs. This is not

to say that as a rule our prayers should be very general, but only that it is unbiblical to insist on a high level of specificity. In fact, on the basis of God's omniscience, our assumption should be that most prayers do not need to be highly specific or contain many details.

Some people argue that making specific requests can help our minds focus. Perhaps this is true, but we are not praying to ourselves. We are not trying to achieve mystical breakthroughs or reach an altered state of consciousness. We are addressing an intelligent person who has total knowledge of our words, thoughts, and circumstances. If God is omniscient, then we should never act as if he is not omniscient.

It is also said that if we make our petitions specific, then we will more likely recognize the answers when they come. However, this is true only if God answers our prayers in the way that we prescribe, but there is no basis to think this. God may indeed move a person to pray a very specific petition, but there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that this is the norm. If you ask for $99.98, has God failed you if you receive $100? Is he a God who refuses to answer prayer, if he gives you $500,000? If you ask for money to pay a loan, has God failed you if he causes the creditor to cancel the debt? A specific prayer might not help you recognize the answer, but it might sometimes do the opposite. Then, it seems that God likes to answer our prayers in ways that further our sanctification, but when we pray we are often concerned with our immediate and apparent needs, and not thinking about our spiritual growth. Thus the answers might come in ways that are different from what we expect.

There is another issue that could compel a person to make highly specific petitions. It receives little attention from writers, but it deserves mention in connection with two biblical passages:

> Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

> So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:9-13)

Jesus offers three examples illustrating how earthly parents respond to their children's petitions. On this basis, he makes a "from lesser to greater" argument[30] to establish the superior benevolence of the heavenly Father. The three examples on earthly parents tell us the point he intends to establish about the heavenly Father:

1. If your son asks for bread, you will not give him a stone.
2. If your son asks for a fish, you will not give him a snake.
3. If your son asks for an egg, you will not give him a scorpion.

The "stone" probably refers to one of the limestone pebbles of the Palestine seashore that looked like small loaves of bread. The "snake" may be an eel, which the Jews could not eat because it was considered unclean. As for the "scorpion," its claws and tail are folded in when it is at rest, and may resemble an egg.[31]

Jesus is saying, in effect, "You will not give your son something that makes it look like you have granted his request, but in fact it is the means by which you will make his situation worse." From this premise, Jesus argues that God is not like the pagan gods in mythology, who would use a person's request as an opportunity to mock and torment him. These mythological deities might either in the process of or in their manner of granting the request make the person's situation much worse.

To illustrate, suppose a man asks for a sum of money to cure his wife of a fatal

disease, these mythological deities might arrange for his wife to die in an accident so that the man would receive the money he wants from her life insurance. But the answer defeats the purpose of the request.

The man could specify that the answer must come in a way that would not bring harm to his wife. But then the deities might decide that the man himself or his son should perish as part of the answer. This frustrates the man's broader desire for a whole and healthy family. The man could specify that no harm should come to anyone. But then he fails to specify how long it should take for the money to come, and the wife dies before it arrives. For a simple favor, the man has to outwit the gods, but the gods have the advantage, and the man is better off not asking for anything.

Stanley Grenz offers this example: "The goddess of the dawn, Aurora, fell in love with a human youth, Tithonus. When offered by Zeus any gift she might choose for her lover, she requested that Tithonus live forever. Unfortunately, Aurora failed to specify that Tithonus remain forever young. Her request was granted, but in an unfortunate way. Poor Tithonus grew ever older and could never die. The gift of Zeus became a curse."[32] Aurora could have added that Tithonus were to remain forever young. But then she would have failed to specify that Tithonus should also be immune to sickness, and so he would have remained immortal and young, but forever ill and in agony.

As one who deals with theology and philosophy, I aim to be specific and precise when communicating my views, and I try to anticipate misunderstandings and objections. However, even if I were to anticipate all the ways that I could be misunderstood, and even if I were to anticipate all the objections, it would be impossible to address all of them in a single presentation. Moreover, I may indeed fail to anticipate certain misunderstandings and objections, so that I must respond to them as they come to my attention. Indeed, even though I have learned to drastically lower my expectations so as to avoid overestimating the intelligence of my critics, I have been surprised again and again. All of the misunderstandings and objections have been so inferior to what I expected from sentient beings that I could not anticipate many of them. When I pray I deal with a being that is infinitely more intelligent, but the illustration remains relevant in that the critics indeed surprised me. I could not anticipate every possibility.

The difficulty is nothing compared to the problems that could arise when speaking to God. If God were to behave like the pagan deities, it would be

impossible to outwit him by formulating a petition so perfect and airtight that it cannot be distorted or answered in a way that makes things worse. But Jesus assures us that we do not need to worry about this, because God is not like the pagan deities. He would not mock us or trick us. When I bring my request to God, I do not need to cover myself from every possible angle. God is my Father, not my enemy. He knows about my needs, and I can trust him when I speak to him. He will use my petition as an opportunity to bless me, and not to make things worse for me.

So when I ask him for an egg, there is no need to specify that it must be a chicken egg of a particular size, of a particular color, from a particular farm, and one that is not spoiled or poisoned. I may mention some details about the matter and I may keep talking for a while just because I delight in speaking to my Father. But I must never worry that a prayer might not be answered because it is not specific enough, or that he would use it to trick me or punish me because the petition is less than perfect and airtight. God is out to bless me, not to hurt me. The Bible tells us that he could do even more than what we can ask or think.

Abraham asked God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if he could find only five righteous men there, and God agreed to this. Since there were not even five righteous men in the cities, God was justified in destroying them, and he did, but he removed Lot from the cities before he destroyed them. If we assume that Abraham's main concern was Lot's safety, then although his prayer technically failed, God knew Abraham's thoughts and granted his true desire. God's answer was better than Abraham's prayer.

Likewise, although it is irreverent to be careless in prayer, there is no need to be perfectly precise and specific. This is not an excuse for laziness. The prayers in the Bible are specific enough so that a prayer that simply says, "Bless me," is likely to be too general in many contexts. But still, God knows what you are going through, so that to cry "Help me!" is often meaningful and sufficient. The point is that it is wrong to pray as if God knows nothing, or as if he is looking for loopholes in our petitions. If God wants to harm someone, he does not need to exploit an imperfect petition to do so, and then even the most perfectly formulated prayer would not deter him.

We must pray in a way that assumes God's attributes. He knows everything, even our thoughts, and this implies that we do not even need to pray aloud, but he can hear us when we pray to him in our minds without speaking out our prayers.

There are several examples in the Bible where prayers were made only in the mind, and they were answered (Genesis 24:45; 1 Samuel 1:13).

Nevertheless, there are advantages to praying aloud. Although our prayers do not need to be highly specific, they should not be so general that even we have no idea what we are saying. Speaking out our prayers compels us to put our thoughts into words, and this helps us to focus our minds – not so that our prayers would be answered, since we are not praying to ourselves, but so that our prayers would constitute intelligent communication. For this reason, we should usually pray in clear and distinct words even when we are praying in our minds. We can "speak" words to God in our minds without saying them aloud with our mouths, and he will hear us.

Another reason for praying aloud is so that others may be edified. Of course, we should never pray aloud in order to impress others. Jesus condemns this evil motive. Rather, although our prayers are addressed to God, they can also comfort and instruct those who hear us (John 11:41-42). When they hear us pray to God in faith and reverence, it may encourage them to also look to God in faith and reverence. Moreover, since any prayer presupposes a theology, if our prayers are filled with mature and accurate understanding, they could serve to inform others in sound doctrine. We find examples of this in Paul's prayers, as recorded in his letters.

There is the objection, "If God is omniscient and knows what we need, then why do we pray to him at all?" It seems that the fact of divine omniscience does not only mean that we do not need to be highly specific in our prayers, but it seems to imply that we do not need to pray at all. If he knows all of our thoughts, desires, and needs, and if he knows our circumstances even better than we do, then he could just decide to grant us whatever we need regardless of whether or not we pray. Thus divine omniscience appears to destroy the relevance of prayer.

The objection fails to acknowledge the nature and purpose of prayer. It imposes an unbiblical idea of prayer on the Christian faith, and then complains that the Christian faith is inconsistent with this unbiblical idea of prayer. If prayer is meant to tell God what he does not know, and to teach him about our needs, desires, and circumstances, then it is indeed unnecessary and irrelevant, since he already knows all these things. However, the purpose of prayer is not to offer him knowledge about anything.

We can note several things in reply. First, we must pray because God commands us to pray. This is a sufficient reason to pray even if we do not receive any additional explanation. Second, prayer is meaningful because it is a means by which God executes his plans. As W. Bingham Hunter writes, "Prayer is a means God uses to give us what he wants."[33] Prayer is one step in the process by which God executes his plans for his creation, and he sovereignly causes even our prayers. Therefore, prayer accords with both his comprehensive sovereignty and knowledge. Third, we should pray because prayer is not only about receiving things from God, but it is a means by which we grow in our sanctification. The will of God is our sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7). The things that God commands us to do and the things that God causes to occur in our lives all contribute to our sanctification in Christ.

We struggle in prayer against unbelief, lusts, and distractions. We struggle to find words to express our needs and desires. We study to refine our thinking so that our prayers may become more pleasing to God. If we see prayer only as the means for self-preservation or self-gratification, then we will become blinded to all those things about prayer that contribute to our spiritual growth. When we learn to see prayer from the broader perspective, that it is a means to meet our needs as well as one that contributes to our sanctification, we will understand that although God knows, decides, and causes all things, there is no conflict between the divine attributes and our need to remain in the habit of prayer and worship.

---

[30] The *a fortiori* argument takes an established premise and argues that the conclusion is true since it is even more certain than the premise. For example: "If a high school student can solve this algebra problem, how much more can a college graduate!" This sort of argument is called *qal vahomer* by the Jews. See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*; InterVarsity Press, 1993; p. 65, 219-220.

[31] William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*; G. R. Welch Co., 1975; p. 274-275; Grenz, *Prayer*; p. 83.

[32] Grenz, *Prayer*; p. 84.

[33] Hunter, *God Who Hears*; p. 12 and 199.

# 6. PRAYER AND TRANSCENDENCE

**Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:23-24)**

God is a transcendent spirit. He exists in a higher form than his creation. Although this is true, he is not aloof from his people, since by his omnipotence he is able to control his creation and communicate with his creatures. Nevertheless, his transcendence means that he is not local. The Bible teaches that he is omnipresent: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there" (Psalm 139:7-8).

God's omnipresence does not mean that he occupies all of physical space. Since "God is spirit" and not matter, he occupies none of physical space. He says in Jeremiah 23:24, "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" If he fills his creation in terms of its physical space, then nothing else can exist as physical matter or occupy physical space, since nothing else would be able to occupy the same physical space as he does. Thus God's omnipresence does not mean that he fills all of physical space, but that he knows and controls all of his creation, including all of physical space, so that the same verse from Jeremiah stresses, "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" In this sense, God is everywhere, and there is nowhere in creation where there is no God, or where his knowledge and sovereignty do not reach.

Leading up to our text, the Samaritan woman said, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). She referred to the debate between the Jews and the Samaritans on the proper place of worship. On the basis that "God is spirit," Jesus answered that true worship would not be identified with location, but with whether one would worship "in spirit and in truth."

Israel's enemies did not understand the spiritual and transcendent nature of God, and they said, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they"

(1 Kings 20:23). They thought that God was local. Those who understood God's nature knew better than this, so that even as Solomon dedicated the Jewish temple, he exclaimed, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). He knew that a transcendent God did not "live" in a physical temple. Although at that time their worship of God was associated with a building, those who understood God knew that he was not local.

Christ's arrival signified that the old administration announced through Moses was about to be fulfilled. As Kenneth Wuest's writes regarding Romans 12:1, "This is in contrast to the worship of the priests which consisted of outward forms, symbolic in themselves of spiritual truth, and yet not rational in the sense that this worship was not devoid of a material connection….Israel preached the gospel through the use of object lessons, the tabernacle, priesthood, and offerings. The Church preaches the same gospel in abstract terms."[34]

Worship in the old administration was also founded on doctrine, on intellectual content, but much was associated with and implied by outward expressions and rituals. Christ's fulfillment of the old administration and inauguration of the new meant that God's people would become even more free to worship him as spirit to spirit, mind to mind, intellect to intellect. True worship is now independent of our location, and much less associated with physical expressions and rituals; rather, the emphasis returns even more to sincerity and truth, to motive and doctrine.[35]

Daniel exhibited extraordinary devotion, character, and intellectual prowess. Theologians often insist that the Hebrews favor "practical" wisdom over theoretical or academic wisdom. This is complete nonsense. The Bible stresses his "book smarts,"[36] and says, "To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of *literature* and *learning*" (Daniel 1:17).[37] He was "ten times" better than the intellectual elite "in every matter of wisdom and understanding" (v. 20). In addition, God granted him prophetic abilities: "And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (v. 17). He appeared to be an all-around superior specimen of a believer.

Nevertheless, when Daniel prayed, he went to a room where "the windows opened toward Jerusalem" (6:10). Those who had understanding knew that this was unnecessary, and he probably did not always pray this way. He was not wrong to do this under the old administration, but under the new, this could

imply a denial of the work of Christ. God is not bound to space, and he is not associated with any location. Jerusalem is not a special place, and there is no such thing as "holy land."

Pilgrimage is a waste. In fact, it is worse than a waste because it damages the soul in that it reinforces a false and carnal viewpoint, and it glorifies a denial of true worship and spirituality, which pertains more to things like doctrine, prayer, and charity. So what if you visit the empty tomb of Jesus? Why would you feel closer to him there? Jesus is not there – he rose from the dead and left that place long ago.

Perhaps visiting some of the biblical locations excites you about the narratives you have read in Scripture, and because of this you feel closer to God. You are a spiritual loser if this is what it takes. In any case, feeling is temporary and deceptive. Real intimacy comes from thinking about the words that you have read from Scripture, and you can do that at home. The Bible teaches that only those who believe the truth and obey his commands are close to God.

If there is any benefit to visiting the biblical sites, it occurs only because they remind you of what you have already read from the Bible, and this brings us back to the point that true spirituality depends on the intellect and its relationship with revealed truth. It has nothing to do with your location. Since any benefit that comes occurs in the mind, you can receive the same by reading your Bible wherever you are. The difference is that you would receive a much greater benefit without all that traveling, since you would spend more time reading and thinking, instead of sight-seeing and trying to convince yourself that you are becoming closer to God.

You must not treat God as if he is local. God is spirit, and you must treat him as spirit by worshiping him in spirit and in truth, and not by visiting Jerusalem. You are also spirit, created in his image, and therefore you can interact with him through prayer and through the words of the Bible.

One of my classmates in high school was a Muslim. He had a prayer carpet with a compass sewn into it so that he could face the direction of Mecca when he prayed at specific times. But I can pray at any time, at any place, and face any direction. I can pray upside down if I want. I can pray under water if I want. It is all the same to me. God hears me not because I am facing this way or that way, and not because I am standing or kneeling. He hears me because he has

sovereignly taken hold of me by Jesus Christ and made me the temple of the Holy Spirit.

There was a five-ton statue of Buddha in Thailand that was made out of fine gold. The monks covered it up with mud to protect it during wartime. The statue could not protect itself. It could not talk, hear, or do anything. When God commanded the use of physical objects in worship under Moses, he made it clear that he transcended those objects, and had no direct or necessary relationship with them. So when Uzzah reached out to steady the ark of the covenant during transportation, God struck him dead (1 Chronicles 13:9-10). He would not be treated like a Buddhist statue.

The Catholics take care to secure the bread and wine of communion, lest they spill the body and blood of Christ. The Reformed and Evangelicals likewise have carnal views on the Lord's Supper. Some who claim to be Christians act as if the crucifix has special powers, and some act as if the printed Bible itself – not the intellectual content, but the physical object that consists of ink and paper – is especially holy. The power of God can work through physical objects, such as Elisha's bones and Paul's handkerchiefs, but it is not tied to physical objects, and the power of the Bible is in its words, not in the printed tome. We appropriate the power of the "Bible," not by wielding the physical object, but by reading the words and believing the doctrines.

The Christian must reject the superstitions in Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, and the Reformed and Evangelical traditions. You approach God by knowledge and by faith, not by some physical posture or technique, and not by kissing a book or by imagining some special presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion. Prayer is not better when you do it in a church or when you are in Jerusalem, and Christ is not better received through the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. You must worship God in spirit and in truth. There is no substitute. If you are in unbelief and ignorance, or if you praise God with your lips while your heart is far from him, then you cannot worship him aright, and you are not close to him even if you stand face to face with Christ. The Christian who knows God, and who worships him in spirit and in truth, also knows to say, "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart" (Romans 10:8).

God's transcendence means that we can remain in constant contact with him through faith. You can even reach out to him with your mind and he will hear you, for even before Psalm 139 mentions his omnipresence, it says, "O LORD,

you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (v. 1-4). The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre could not stand the idea of Someone constantly "staring" at him, and who would be aware of all that he thinks and does, and thus he needed to be an atheist. On the other hand, as those who have been chosen for salvation, the divine attributes not only induce in us a holy fear, they also bring invincible peace and comfort, and we would have it no other way.

[34] Kenneth S. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955.
[35] Worship is not completely independent of the physical. Our bodies form the "temple" of God (1 Corinthians 6:19), and there are the symbolic rituals of baptism and communion. Still, the significance of all three hinges upon the relationship of our intellect to revelation, that is, the relationship of our mind to Scripture.
[36] Any so-called "practical" wisdom must have as its foundation an intellectual grasp of Scripture. What Christians consider practical wisdom is often nothing more than convenient but worldly and unbiblical ways of doing things. I reject the distinction between the theoretical and the practical in the first place. "Practical" wisdom is only theoretical wisdom about what we consider "practical" things; otherwise, it is not "wisdom" at all, but just an unexamined habit or instinct. If it is "wisdom," then it is intellectual.
[37] Their abilities were tested against the "scribes" (v. 20) of the day. "Magicians" is perhaps a misleading translation. See *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, by Robert Young.

# PRAYER AND THE MORAL LIFE

Christian teachings on prayer sometimes make the mistake of placing more emphasis on the act of prayer, or any method or technique associated with it, than on the person who prays. However, as W. Bingham Hunter writes, "From a biblical point of view, prayer is related to everything that we are and everything that God is. God does *not* respond to our prayers. God responds to *us*: to our whole life….Our all-knowing God responds to our entire lives, of which our prayers are merely a small part. This means that how you and I live when we are not praying and worshiping is as significant – perhaps more so – than when we do."[38] Thus a discussion on the believer's moral life would make an immense contribution to his prayer life also.

[38] Hunter, *God Who Hears*; p. 13, 40.

# 7. PRAYER AND MOTIVATION

**And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)**

The effect of sin in man is so strong that he would make the most sacred activities into expressions of his wickedness. He would do what seems to be the most spiritual thing from the most unspiritual motive. A man who prays long and often may appear spiritual and devoted, but perhaps he exhibits such behavior precisely to make us think this about him. Sin makes a man's heart so vile that he would even sacrifice his life to make himself look like a hero to others, and so Paul writes that it is possible for a person to suffer martyrdom from a motive other than love. Some people eagerly invite and endure persecution just for the glory of it.

People often display strong emotions when they pray or sing at church. Some of them are sincere, but many of them are not. Their emotions do not arise from gratitude toward God's grace, but from their self-pity or their desire to appear spiritual. For similar reasons, some people dance and scream at church to impress others with their spiritual freedom. They want to show that they love God so much that they do not care what other people think about them; however, they behave the way they do precisely because they care very much about what other people think. Of course, there are different kinds of phonies. Perhaps even more people act all proper and reserved because they care even more strongly what other people think. They want to show people that they are reverent and sophisticated. You will find many of these in Reformed, Evangelical, and other traditional churches.

Preaching the true gospel includes a declaration of the sovereignty of God and the cost of discipleship. But Christians often preach a false gospel that hides or even denies these crucial elements. For this reason, many false converts have infiltrated the church, and the majority of those who call themselves Christians today are probably not true Christians. Since people who are not true Christians

cannot worship God in spirit and in truth, there is now very little true worship in our gatherings. It is easy to throw a rock concert and call it a worship service, and it is easy to think that if we feel good about something, then it must be acceptable to God. Some churches think that freedom in worship must include rolling on the floor and foaming at the mouth. Other groups think that every church meeting should be like a funeral service. They equate reverence with death, unbelief, and rigid order. But only the Bible can show us the nature of true worship.

If God has regenerated you, then your faith is genuine, your love for him is real, and you indeed desire to offer true worship. However, your sanctification is not yet complete, so that although you continue to grow in holiness, at times you fail and sin, and therefore it remains possible that you do not always worship God in perfect sincerity. Although you love and worship God truly, you love and worship him imperfectly, and sometimes with ulterior motives.

Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with our all. Some people think that they are doing this, but they do not realize what the commandment means. You may feel loving toward God, but that does not indicate how much you love him. Jesus said that if you love him, you would obey his commandments. If you love him perfectly, you would obey his commandments perfectly. If you love God with all of your heart, then you would be perfect, and you would never sin. But John wrote that if we say that we have no sin, then the truth is not in us. If we admit that we continue to sin, then we also admit that we do not love God perfectly.

Most people cannot love God very much, not to say perfectly, because of their theological ignorance. If you know next to nothing about God, then you cannot love him, since your love is either directed toward nothing, or to a false concept of God. Whether you have no concept of God or a false concept of God, the object of your love is not God. Whatever you think you love so intensely is not God, but a product of your imagination and of false theology. Then, unless God has chosen you for salvation, the more you find out about God, the more you will hate him. Only the chosen ones can love a God who has absolute sovereignty and exhaustive knowledge, who does whatever he pleases, who saves those he chooses to love and damns those he chooses to hate.

A popular assumption is that if God gives you a command, then you are surely able to obey it. But this is false doctrine. A command from God only defines

right and wrong, that it would be right to obey it and wrong to disobey it. The command itself does not imply that you have the ability to obey, and it does not confer the ability to obey. Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with our all, but no one is able to obey it. Anyone who claims that he loves God perfectly has only succeeded in showing us his very low idea of what perfection means. And if he loves God very much, he would not lie and say that his love for God is already perfect.

Since we are unable to love and obey God perfectly when he commands us to love and obey him perfectly, this means that if we are to be acceptable to God, we must have a foreign righteousness, even God's own perfect righteousness, imputed to our account. This is what Jesus Christ has done for his people. If God has chosen you for salvation, then Christ came to die for you, and he has paid the debt of your sin. When God regenerated you and caused you to believe in Christ, his righteousness was imputed to you, and you were justified in his sight. You are accepted before God on the basis of this imputed righteousness.

This does not mean that you may stop fighting sin. The Christian is not in the same miserable condition as the non-Christian. The Holy Spirit causes the Christian to recall and obey God's commandments. Thus when you realize that your motives in prayer and worship are not always pure, instead of becoming discouraged, you can become aware and active in fighting the sin that lingers. Strive to remove the remaining wickedness in your heart. Stifle the desire for men's praise and approval.

Practice private prayer and worship. If you have a drive to pray when other people can hear, and this enthusiasm disappears when nobody is watching, then this is evidence that your love for God is weak or even false. Your love for God alone should sustain your habit of prayer and study. Jesus said that if you perform spiritual activities in order to gain men's approval, then men's approval is all the reward you will receive. God will give you nothing. But if you will pray to God privately in faith and sincerity, then he will hear you and reward you.

When you are in church gatherings and other public settings, frustrate that sinful desire to impress people. Maintain a low profile when possible, and avoid drawing attention by your outward appearance and behavior. This includes dressing, praying, singing, and doing other things in ways that would not make you unnecessarily stand out from the others. It is a wicked thing to exploit a

public gathering to convince others that you are spiritual and full of love for the Lord. Of course, there are times when one has to do things that may attract some attention, but that are necessary to edify the church. For example, the preacher has to stand up and speak, and the ushers have to walk around the meeting place.

Some people claim that we should allow the Holy Spirit freedom to control how we behave. If the Spirit moves them to sing and dance and to roll on the floor, who are they to resist? It is true that the Spirit can move us to tremendous exuberance, and it is right to go along with this in submission to church leadership and when it is not done by only one person, thus distracting everyone else from worship. Paul insisted that we could retain control of ourselves: "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). Then, of course, church leaders often use order as an excuse to justify their hardness of heart and to quench the Spirit. They must be condemned.

Frustrating the desire for attention and approval is not only the responsibility of the individual, but also of the church community. Christians often encourage sinful motives and hypocritical behavior. Many admire superficial displays of excitement instead of true character and devotion. Virtue is harder to detect, because we cannot see the hearts of men, but we can surely stop showering praise on people based on their outward behavior. Sometimes it is acceptable to express appreciation for a spiritual person, but there is never a place for flattery and cheap compliments. Ministers greatly err when they encourage unrestrained expression in prayer and worship without reprimanding sinful motives. They ought to preach against superficial spirituality and expose pretenders. They must urge believers to seek God's approval alone and to value private prayer and worship.

Never underestimate human sinfulness. Even in private prayer and worship there is much room for hypocrisy and wicked motives. Self-approval is also a common sin, and so we must practice self-examination and self-confrontation. We must face the sin in our own hearts with constant vigilance. Jesus talked about a Pharisee who congratulated himself before God for being better than a tax collector, while the tax collector asked God for mercy. The one who humbled himself was the one who left the place of prayer justified (Luke 18:9-14). God is not impressed with a show of spirituality, but he will reward one who comes in faith and meekness.

# 8. PRAYER AND OBEDIENCE

**If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable. (Proverbs 28:9)**

Antinomianism denies the continual relevance and application of God's law. This popular school of thought represents the widespread opposition against the Bible as God's revealed standard of right and wrong, and God's rule for our thoughts, actions, and lifestyles.

Antinomianism has a strong following because men are born hostile to God's law. As Paul writes, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:6-7). The sinful mind rebels against God's law, but the spiritual mind submits to it. Since only the regenerate are "controlled by the Spirit," only Christians can submit to the law of God. Thus if we know something about one's relationship with God's law, we can also draw some conclusions about his spiritual condition.

God's law divides humanity into two groups – the righteous and the wicked. Since the fall of Adam, all men are wicked by birth. They are condemned by God's law because of the guilt they have inherited and because of the sins that they commit. However, even before God determined that all men would become wicked through Adam, he had already conceived and chosen some whom he would save by his grace and cause to become righteous through Jesus Christ, and he had already conceived and chosen all others for damnation and endless suffering in hell. He caused Adam's fall so that this plan of redemption and damnation might be carried out, beginning with this division of humanity.

Since then, humanity has remained in the continual conflict between the seed of God and the seed of Satan: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This conflict reached a high point in the work of Jesus Christ, who came to the earth and decisively crushed the kingdom of Satan. It is entirely out of touch with reality to think that religion is about the unity of mankind, since God shows us that it is about the dichotomy of these two groups, and unity is desirable only among the followers of Christ.[39] This is basic to the

biblical philosophy of history, and opposes the non-Christian interpretation of human events.

God makes a sharp distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the light and the darkness, the Christians and the non-Christians:

> Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." (2 Corinthians 6:14-17)

Accordingly, God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked when it comes to prayer. Proverbs 15:8 says, "The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him."

People often pray in earnestness when an urgent need arises or when a tragedy happens, but many of them would not say that they are religious at all, and still less that they are Christians. So of course they have no interest in learning and obeying God's commands in their everyday lives. The Bible tells us that God detests their prayers.

Jesus says in John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Who are those who remain in Christ and who have his words remain in them? The description is true only for Christians – not all those who call themselves Christians, but real Christians. God has changed them by his power, and by his Spirit he causes them to obey his commands. This narrows down the group to very few people. We should emphasize theology even more than prayer, because without the first, the second is meaningless and impossible. Preachers who stress prayer first offers non-Christians a false assurance that their prayers are acceptable to God, when they are not even saved. They are not in Christ, and his words are not in them. They remain wicked to the core, and heading toward the flames of hell.

There are fanciful theories about what it means to remain or abide in Christ. He is the vine and we are the branches (v. 1-6). Many people have made false inferences from this. So they describe our life in Christ in mystical terms, and portray the relationship as an ontological oneness. However, Jesus places the whole emphasis on the intellect and obedience as he repeatedly refers to his words and commands (v. 3, 7, 10, 11). The false interpretations result in exalting praying, singing, and other such activities as means to abide in Christ. But verse 7 states that successful prayer is the result of abiding in Christ, not the means of abiding in Christ.

John's writings explicitly define what it means to abide in Christ. In verse 10, Jesus says, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." Then, in his first letter, John writes, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him….Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them" (1 John 3:21-22, 24). We abide in Christ by obeying his commands.

John himself insists that we occasionally stumble, and says, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 1:10-2:1). So he is not speaking of perfection, but a lifestyle that clearly exhibits obedience toward God's commands. People do not abide in Christ just because they continue to claim that they believe in Christ. Jesus answers, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46); therefore, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

You may have heard, "Christianity is not about following a set of rules." Of course, it does not consist of rules that say, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21), as far as these are "human commands and teachings" (v. 22). However, it indeed sets forth many rules: "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil….Do not take revenge, my friends…Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:16-21). The

Christian faith reaffirms the Levitical command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), and Jesus and Paul said that this is a summary of – not a replacement or cancellation of – many other laws and rules: "'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and *whatever other commandment* there may be" (Romans 13:9), because "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Matthew 22:39-40; Romans 13:9-10). To walk in love is to follow the Bible's laws and rules in how we relate to God and to people.

"Christianity is not about following a set of rules" is a misleading statement. We are not justified by obeying God's commands, since we cannot obey them before we become Christians. But when God saves us, he gives us his Spirit and causes us to obey his laws: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Therefore, if we mean that we are not justified by obeying God's laws, then it is correct. God credits the righteousness of Christ to our account as a gift. However, if we mean that God has not set forth laws and rules for us to follow in the Christian life, then this is a lie and a heresy. In fact, Christians have been regenerated and justified so that they may obey God's laws and rules. This is so much the case that if a person does not exhibit a lifestyle of obedience toward the Bible's commands, he is not a Christian no matter what he says. He can cry with great conviction, "Jesus Christ died for my sins and I trust him as my Savior." He lies. He is not a Christian. A man is not saved by obedience, but he has not been saved unless he exhibits obedience. Salvation comes by grace apart from works, but if a man has no works, it shows that God has not granted him salvation by grace.

Prayer is not chiefly a matter of using the right methods and saying the right words. You must be the right kind of person. This is the most crucial factor. Jesus said that you must be a Christian, one who believes in Jesus Christ, who receives his words, and who follows his commands. Then, you may "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Of course, we cannot earn answers to our prayers by our good conduct, because we cannot earn anything even if we fully obey God. As Jesus said, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). God does not

owe us even if we demonstrate perfect obedience, since we owe him perfect obedience in the first place.

So it is not that we must earn God's attention, but we must be Christians, and if we are Christians, then we will think and behave like Christians. Then, we will know that God hears us, for as Jesus said, "The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27).

[39] It was an act of grace toward the chosen ones that caused the division and hostility between the two groups. If God had caused the fall of humanity but had not reserved some within humanity for salvation, then all of humanity would be united in wickedness and destined for hellfire.

# 9. PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE

**Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. (Luke 18:1)**

In some circles, the prevailing opinion is that it indicates a lack of faith to pray about something more than once. Proponents of this view claim that if you truly believe that God has heard your petition, then you would not pray about it again. Even if you mention it, you would not repeat the petition but would offer thanksgiving. Instead of asking God for the same thing, you should thank him that he has granted your request.

There are those who call themselves Christians but who are so full of themselves and their theological traditions that they have no room for faith or for the miraculous manifestations of God's Spirit. Thus we commend the intention of those who wish to walk in faith. They wish to pray in a way that would exhibit faith in God, and that would not insult him by speaking or behaving in a way that suggests doubt toward him.

However, although their approach seems to exhibit faith, it is not the conclusion of careful thinking and exegesis, but of false analogies and interpretations. The result is an unnecessary restriction and a method of prayer that sometimes holds us in bondage more than it liberates our faith in God. The Bible, in fact, does not teach that faith forbids us from asking for the same things more than once, but that if we pray in faith, we must sometimes persist by repeating our petitions.

An analogy is sometimes used to show why we should not pray for something more than once. Suppose a child asks his father for something again and again when the father has already promised to give it to him after the first request. We would judge the child to be untrusting, and his behavior obnoxious. By repeatedly asking for the same thing when it has already been promised to him, the child insults his father's integrity.

The analogy seems reasonable as long as we refer to a human relationship, but it falls apart when we apply it to our relationship with God. In fact, it does not even fully apply in a human relationship. Those who say that we should not pray for something more than once nevertheless insist that we should repeatedly

thank God for granting us our request after the initial petition. However, if the child in the analogy thanks his father over and over again after the initial petition and before the item materializes, it would have the same irritating and insulting effect as if he repeatedly asks for the same thing. It would appear as if the child distrusts the father's integrity, so that he repeatedly reminds him of his promise.

To be consistent, those who say that we should pray for something only once should also say that we should not thank God for granting what we have asked until the item materializes, lest it seems that we remind him of it because of unbelief. Then, after the item materializes, imagine if the child thanks the father for it over and over again, even hundreds of times. This would amount to a form of mental torment, and he would make the father regret granting the request in the first place. On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with thanking God hundreds of times.

Analogies can be misleading. Although in a human relationship, whether we are referring to a father, a friend, or a stranger, it would seem untrusting to repeat a petition over and over again, when applied to prayer the analogy fails because it reduces God to a mere man. But God is not a man, and he is not a human father. Although there are similarities between the fatherhood of God and the fatherhood of man, or our relationship with God and our relationship with man, these are not similar on all points, and we must look to Scripture to determine on which points they are similar, and on which points they are different. An analogy is decisive for doctrine only when it comes from the Bible, and only when the application is consistent with the context in which it appears in the Bible.

God is divine and not human, and he is not like us in many ways. An analogy that fails to take this into account reduces him to a mere man, and therefore becomes heretical and blasphemous. Some seem to think that since we call God our "Father," we may regard him almost exactly like an ideal human father. This is a dangerous assumption. We would never worship a human father. A person who sings songs of worship to his earthly father to extol his power and wisdom is probably demon-possessed. In any case, the analogy of a human relationship cannot establish the teaching that we must not repeat our petitions in prayer.

However, the teaching is not based solely on analogies. Proponents attempt to show biblical support for it:

> Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe

> that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mark 11:24)
>
> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him. (1 John 5:14-15)

Now, their mere attempt to take these verses seriously instead of explaining them away makes them better men than most Christians. But this does not mean their interpretation is correct.

The argument is that these verses tell us that after we have prayed, we are to believe that we have received what we asked, and then we are to talk and act in a way that is consistent with this. Among other things, this implies that we should not repeat the petition; otherwise, it would indicate that we do not really believe that we have received, and this is a lack of faith.

Suppose the interpretation of these verses is correct, and they teach that once we have prayed for something, we are to believe that we have already received it. However, they do not indicate how we are to act when we believe that we have received. It may be true that if I believe that a man has granted my request, then I should not mention it to him again, but we have seen that this does not necessarily apply to God, because God is not a man. Instead, God is to be treated the way he demands to be treated. Even if the interpretation of these verses is correct, it is an invalid inference to then assert that we must not repeat our petitions.

James writes, "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17-18). He says this as he talks about the "prayer of faith" (v. 15, KJV) and "the prayer of a righteous man" (v. 16). Elijah was on a mission from God. "He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain." This came as judgment against the idolatrous nation. After a time, he challenged the false prophets to a supernatural duel, and won a decisive victory. Then it was time for him to pray that it would rain.

Since Elijah was doing all these things at God's command (1 Kings 18:36), he was praying according to God's will. And John says that when we pray

according to God's will, we can "know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). Therefore, according to those who say that we should not repeat our petitions, Elijah should have believed that God had granted his request after he prayed for rain the first time. There is something like this in 1 Kings 18:41, for even before Elijah prayed, he said to the king, "There is the sound of a heavy rain." So those who teach this about faith are not entirely wrong. Faith indeed behaves like this. When Christians indiscriminately denounce this teaching on faith, it is not because they wish to remain faithful to the Scripture, but because they wish to excuse their own unbelief.

However, Elijah proceeded to pray for rain, although he said that there was the sound of a heavy rain. This contradicted the teaching that we must not continue to ask if we believe that we have received. Even before he prayed, he already believed that God's promise was as good as done. So according to that teaching, he should not have prayed even the first time, and certainly after the first time, he should not have continued to pray. But Elijah not only prayed, but he prayed over and over again:

> Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. "Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back." The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea." So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'" Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. (1 Kings 18:42-45)

James explains that Elijah was praying for rain. Thus believing that something is as good as done can accommodate not only the first instance of prayer, but multiple instances of prayer. Even when one believes that his request has been granted, and even when he believes that he has already received, he may still pray – not once, twice, or five times, but until the answer materializes.

Concerning Paul's "thorn in the flesh," he says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:8). It seems that he could have continued to repeat the petition if the answer had not come, but he stopped because the Lord gave him a reply (v. 9).

Then, in Luke 11:5-8, Jesus offers this illustration:

> Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and from inside he shall answer and say, "Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (NASB)[40]

Again, we must apply only the point intended by this illustration to our relationship with God, and not every aspect of the human relationship described. It would be absurd to take from the illustration that God is like a friend who sleeps, and whom we must awaken to hear our petitions. This is not the point of the illustration. God is not a man, and he never sleeps (Psalm 121:4). Rather, the purpose is to encourage persistence – if a human friend would give you what you ask because of your persistence, how much more would God answer you because of your persistence!

James writes, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). We agree that we must have faith, but the issue is what it means to have faith. Those who say that we must not repeat our petitions leap without warrant from the premise that we must have faith to the conclusion that we must not repeat our petitions. We cannot accept this idea of faith, because it comes from false inferences from biblical verses and inapplicable analogies from human relationships.

The true meaning of faith comes from a correct reading of the Bible. In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable that helps us define faith in its relation to persistence:

> Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept

> coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" (Luke 18:1-5)

Jesus intends to teach his disciples "that they should always pray and not give up" (v. 1). The judge in the parable is reluctant to help the widow, but this does not mean that God is likewise reluctant. Rather, the judge serves as a contrast to God: "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (v. 6-8). If even a reluctant judge would grant the request of a persistent widow, how much more would a willing Father grant the petition of a persistent believer!

The widow illustrates the point that we should "always pray and not give up," and that we should "cry out to him day and night." She repeats her petition many times, over and over again, and the judge complains that she "keeps bothering" him. Thus verse 1 ("pray and not give up"), verse 5 ("keeps bothering"), and verse 7 ("day and night") all indicate that we should repeat our petitions in prayer.

Jesus concludes, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (v. 8). He looks for faith in people, and he uses the widow to illustrate the kind of faith that he wants to find. This is the faith that keeps asking and refuses to stop. This is the faith that cries out to God day and night. Against the assumption that faith does not repeat our petitions, Jesus teaches that faith repeats our petitions to God over and over again.

This is how the Bible defines and portrays faith. Some people indeed repeat their petitions out of unbelief, because they do not think that God heard them, but it is possible to repeat our petitions out of faith, because we think that he continues to hear us and that it is meaningful to speak to him again. When we repeat our petitions, it is not always a sign of unbelief, but it is a sign of faith if we do it because of the reason Jesus teaches, that is, because we believe in God's justice and goodness, and that our persistence would bear fruit. But it is always a sign of unbelief to give up.

God arranges our lives so that we would persist in prayer and increase in Christ. This entails growth in patience, knowledge, and such things. One of the most valuable things is to affirm a biblical set of priorities. Qualities such as patience, endurance, character, are things that we must treasure and not despise:

> But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. (Job 23:10)
>
> Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)
>
> Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything….Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (James 1:2-4, 5:10-11)

We tend to cringe from hardships, since they rob us of our comfort. But the Christian must place his spiritual development above his natural convenience. Peter writes, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7). I may desire comfort, but my desire for a true and tried faith is much greater, since my faith is "of greater worth than gold." Genuine faith cannot be destroyed by testing, but it is refined and purified by it.

Many Christians use this as an excuse for their failures. But this is not supposed to be an excuse – Christians must truly consider the development of their knowledge and character in Christ as more important than their comfort. Moreover, Christians must not simply endure hardships, since the Bible teaches that true faith produces a victorious spirit by which we overcome the hardships that we face.

Then, there is an assumption that the very experience of suffering would further our sanctification. This is false. Just as sensation and experience themselves cannot provide any intelligible information to the mind, but can only provide the occasions upon which God directly acts on the intellect and conveys to it intelligible information,[41] neither can suffering in itself teach us anything or help our spiritual growth.

Our suffering can at the most provide the occasions upon which we remember, assimilate, learn to obey the information revealed to us in the Bible. Since no experience comes with its own interpretation, a proper reaction to experience – one that results in spiritual growth – can come only because we have an understanding of biblical revelation and the ability to relate it to our experience. Knowledge of biblical revelation can come either before or after the experience, but until one has this knowledge, the experience remains unintelligible, so that he can learn nothing from it.

Many people fail to grasp this crucial point, and so they consider suffering as inherently valuable, as inherently able to teach us spiritual things. The result is that their faith becomes focused on their own experience – on themselves – instead of on God's revelation to them. This in turn becomes a form of self-worship, or idolatry.

Hebrews 5:8 says, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." But a verse like this cannot support their view, because Jesus had thorough knowledge of Scripture. He knew God's redemptive plan, his own place in the plan, and so he knew how to interpret his suffering. The information did not come from the suffering itself. Even Hebrews 5:8 itself comes to us as a biblical verse and not as an experience. Experience does not bring its own interpretation. From suffering, one person could develop patience, obedience, and other virtues, but another person could just as easily develop bitterness, selfishness, and defiance. In fact, it seems that most people become worse because of suffering. Because they do not experience suffering through the grace and knowledge of God, they become hardened and self-righteous.

Two people experiencing the same situation can have opposite interpretations of what is happening, and only the Bible can tell us the truth. In fact, God can use the same event to punish the wicked and to instruct the righteous, so that there is no inherent meaning in any experience. For our suffering and our experience to

have any meaning at all, we must be Christians who study and obey the Scripture.

If you have the wrong priorities – if you do not think that faith tested and refined is "of greater worth than gold" – then you will not appreciate what God is doing for you. You may think that he is reluctant, and that he does not answer you. But if you are a Christian, then your true desire is for your faith to be tested and refined, so that it may be approved and vindicated. A growing understanding of what God says on the subject and the continual work of sanctification that he is effecting in us will bring this true desire to the surface, allowing it to direct our behavior and our response to circumstances.

All of this cannot become an excuse for unbelief and for unanswered prayers, because God indeed answers, even by signs and wonders. As Jesus says, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." The Lord teaches that if we have faith, then God will answer us. Faith endures suffering, but it also overcomes it.

[40] Alternate translations to "persistence" include "boldness" and "shamelessness," but these do not affect our point, since the intent to encourage persistent prayer remains. Indeed, the kind of persistence we are speaking of is not easily stifled by embarrassment.
[41] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, and *Captive to Reason*.

# PRAYER AND THE INNER LIFE

The inner life, or the life of the mind, is foundational to human existence. Even the moral life is subsumed under the inner life. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19). A man sins first in his mind – in his immoral intentions, desires, habits, and reasonings – before he sins in his body.

Just as sinfulness begins in the mind, righteousness also begins in the mind. Paul says that the Christian's "new self" is "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24), and the parallel verse in Colossians 3:10 says that it is "in knowledge" that this "new self" is being "renewed…in the image of its Creator." Accordingly, Romans 12:2 says that it is by the "renewing of your mind" that you will be "transformed," and become able to discern the will of God, which is good, pleasing, and perfect. To advance in the moral life, one must first restructure the mind according to biblical precepts.

This is contrary to the anti-intellectual tendency in our church and culture. The Bible offers clear instructions on the spiritual life. Contrary to the Christian faith, many people think of the spiritual life as a mystical life that removes the focus on doctrine and the intellect. Then, some of those who seem to exalt the Scripture nevertheless deny that it is grasped by the intellect, but instead by a non-rational part of man that they call the "spirit." However, the Bible identifies the spirit and the mind as belonging to the same part of man, and it distinguishes man into spirit and body, or mind and body.[42] The spirit or mind is made God's image, and by it we understand and assimilate the doctrines of biblical revelation.

The same principle that applies to the Christian's moral development also applies to all other aspects of his faith, including the prayer life. Just as a strong moral life is founded on theological understanding, a prayer life that exhibits excellence in content and practice is founded on sound doctrine. And just as improvement in character begins with biblical instructions, advancement in the prayer life begins by enriching the inner life.

The Bible shows us the prayer lives of great men. Jesus could pray to the Father all night with purpose and power, and Paul's letters include prayers that are masterpieces in theological reflection. If your prayer life is weak and your

prayers are shallow, it is because you are weak and shallow. You cannot change this just by praying more and more, because if that is all you do, it would only reinforce your bad habits and doctrines. Instead, you must enhance the inner life by rebuilding it on a foundation of biblical doctrines and precepts.

[42] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

# 10. PRAYER AND EXPERIENCE

**One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)**

Learning by doing is a popular theory of education. Many Christians have embraced this unbiblical and evolutionist theory,[43] and have applied it to prayer. If this theory of learning is correct, then there is limited value in constructing a biblical theology of prayer, but the time is better spent by actually praying. Thus they say that the best way to learn about prayer is not by talking about it or reading about it, but by doing it. Prayer is learned by experience. This teaching is false and destructive.

It is impossible to learn about prayer by experience because it is impossible to even begin without any instructions or assumptions that cannot be derived from experience. What is prayer? Do I pray to someone or something? Who is this someone or something? What are the attributes of this someone or something? What is my relationship with this someone or something? Do I have direct access to this someone or something, or do I need a mediator? Who or what is this mediator, and what are the attributes of this mediator? What is my relationship with this mediator? Does it matter what physical posture or position I assume during prayer? For what or whom should I pray? How often, how long, and how intensely should I pray? Should I persist in my requests, or should I present any petition only once? Experience can answer none of these questions, but we need answers to all of them and many others in order to pray. In fact, how do I even know to ask these questions? They already presuppose some knowledge and reflection on the subject.

These people tell us that we learn how to pray by experience, and that we can learn more about prayer by doing it than by talking about it or reading about it. Where is the biblical justification for this claim? They want to give the impression that they offer this advice because they take prayer seriously, and that they want other people to take it seriously as well. But the truth is that their advice is sacrilegious. They treat the presence of God as a place for experimentation instead of a place of worship, and they want the rest of us to likewise abuse our access to God. If the Bible sets forth explicit instructions on

prayer, then we should follow them instead of learn them during prayer. We test God's patience and kindness if we approach him without first learning how to approach him, especially when he has already provided instructions about it.

God does not always immediately punish those who approach him improperly, but at times he would strike those who fail to follow his instructions for worship. By the principle of trial and error or learning by doing, a man could easily have become a dead priest before he became an experienced one. Likewise, Paul wrote that God disciplined the Corinthians because they did not respect the Lord's body, so that many of them were weak, sick, and dead. For the dead ones, it was too late to learn by experience. Those who did not want to follow them to the grave probably stopped learning by experience and started heeding the word of God.

Thus it is not only impossible to learn anything by experience in the first place, but we should not even attempt to learn from experience what God has revealed to us by verbal instructions. Even if God does not kill us for it, if we attempt to learn about prayer by experience, we could end up forming bad habits and reinforcing false ideas that may never receive correction. Learning by experience is an impossible approach, and when it comes to prayer, it is also an irreverent and dangerous approach. A man could become weak or sick because of it. He could die because of it.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he did not tell them to learn by doing it, but he taught them how to pray by telling them how to pray. They mentioned that John the Baptist taught his own disciples how to pray, and so those disciples learned about prayer also by instruction, and not by experience. Prayer can be taught and learned, and the way to teach and to learn how to pray is not by experience, but by speaking and writing, and by hearing and reading. The biblical way to learn about prayer is not by doing it, but by talking about it, thinking about it, and reading about it. This is also true about other aspects of the spiritual life.

We learn by reading, listening, and thinking, not by doing. This makes it possible for a person to do something correctly at the first attempt. In contrast, learning by experience inserts the necessity of failure into the principle and meaning of education, but this does not ultimately lead to truth. To learn by experience is also to learn by sensation. A person's sensation often does not correspond to the object or reality from which the sensation arises. Then, even if the sensation

corresponds, he must make inferences from the sensation to derive knowledge from it, and inferences from a sensation are always fallacious. If an inference is stated in logical form, there would be a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. If the conclusion says more than the premises imply, then it is an inductive inference, which is invalid. But to derive knowledge from experience or sensation, one must continuously make inductive inferences, even thousands of them. Therefore, learning by experience is always fallacious and can never arrive at truth. The approach guarantees failure and deception.

Even if we pretend that it is possible to learn from our mistakes, by experience we cannot know when we make mistakes in prayer. And even if we pretend that we can catch some of these mistakes, by experience we cannot catch most or all of them. Then, even if we pretend that we can catch most or all of our mistakes, by experience we cannot know how to correct them. The difficulties become more and more numerous when we think about the matter.

It is likely that you have been making mistakes when you pray, but you do not recognize them as mistakes. And the more experience you have in making those mistakes, the more they are reinforced as habits. By experience, you cannot even know that it is wrong to pray to the angel Gabriel or to Buddha instead of to God the Father. People have been praying to Buddha for centuries, and after so much experience, they still do not recognize their error. They learn that they are wrong when we preach the Jesus Christ to them and tell them that they are wrong. There is no justification for forcing God to endure our mistakes in prayer when we can avoid them by reading the Bible. If we learn from the Bible in the first place, we would know not to make those mistakes at all.

If you insist on learning by experience when God has set forth the information you need by revelation, then in effect you are shaking your fist toward heaven and saying, "I refuse to use your way to learn how to serve you! I will use my own way!" Just as it is sinful to serve God one way when he has prescribed another way, it is also sinful to try to learn how to serve him one way when he has prescribed another way. We must submit to God not only in what we think, but also in how we come to think it. If we defy him in how we learn, then we will come to false conclusions, and we will also defy him in what we say and do.

The way to learn about prayer is by talking about it, reading about it, and thinking about it. For most Christians, in addition to studying the Bible for themselves, this would mean reading and listening to instructions delivered by

preachers and theologians. However, although the Bible is infallible, the people who teach it are not. But what appears to be a problem only serves to accentuate the advantages of this approach. Verbal presentations are public and definite, and therefore subject to scrutiny. We can think about them and discuss them with the Bible as our common standard. Thus it is by talking about it, reading about it, and thinking about it, rather than by doing it, that we will advance in understanding and arrive at an accurate knowledge of the truths about prayer.

[43] See Vincent Cheung, *The Ministry of the Word*.

# 11. PRAYER AND REVELATION

**Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:11)**

There is a popular teaching that we should freely express our thoughts and our emotions during prayer, even if they consist of intense anger and bitterness against God. Portions of the Psalms and the Prophets are often used to support this. The assumption is that since the prophets were righteous men, and since these righteous men vented their frustrations to God, therefore we should likewise vent our frustrations when we pray. This would sometimes include accusing and insulting God to his face.

This is damnable blasphemy. From the fact that the prophets sometimes vented their frustrations to God, we cannot immediately infer that we should also do the same. Rather, we must first examine the contexts of these incidents, and God's comments on the complaints. The Bible records what the prophets did, but what does this same Bible say about what they did? How did God respond to them?

Job, of course, is a classic case. He has been suffering tremendous pains and tragedies, and he says:

> I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God: Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked? (Job 10:1-3)
>
> If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. (Job 23:3-5)
>
> Oh that I had one to hear me! Behold, here is my signature; let the Almighty answer me! (Job 31:35, NASB)

God does not praise Job for his forthrightness, but he rebukes him for his speech, his attitude, and his ignorance. He says to Job, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!…Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:2, 7-8). God vehemently disapproves of those who demand of him, "Answer me!" He says to these people, "No, you answer me!"

Habakkuk says, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted" (Habakkuk 1:2-4). This is the state of his nation.

Then, God answers that he would use the Babylonians to punish the Jews: "Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own" (v. 5-6). In other words, God says that he is doing something about the situation.

However, Habakkuk disapproves of the divine strategy: "O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (v. 12-13).

Habakkuk is shocked that God would use heathens to judge his people. But after he has complained about it, he adds, "I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved" (2:1, NASB).[44] The prophet expects God to rebuke him for the complaint.

Jeremiah bluntly states his concern to God: "You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1). How does God react to this? Does he encourage Jeremiah to

vent his emotions, as some teach that we should express our resentment toward God just as a child beats on his father's chest? Or is the Father still God to us? God responds, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (v. 5). In other words, "If you cannot handle what you have been through so far, how can you handle the greater difficulties that are coming?"

Again, Jeremiah complains, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (15:18). Does God apologize to Jeremiah? No, he first rebukes the prophet and then gives him a promise:

> "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the LORD. I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel. (v. 19-21)

God calls Jeremiah to repent and stop uttering "worthless words." The promise is but a repetition and reminder of what the prophet received at the beginning of his ministry (1:17-19). Since Christians usually embrace secular psychology and an unbiblical idea of love, they would consider that insensitive.

Thus although the Bible records the complaints of the prophets, the same Bible discourages us to imitate them. Of course we can be honest toward God, but the issue is what kind of people we are to be, and how we should resolve our frustration. A forthright demon would speak only blasphemies, so forthrightness in itself cannot achieve righteousness. It is grossly irreverent to demand from God answers that he has already provided in the Bible. He already said to Habakkuk, "The righteous will live by his faith" (2:4). If you claim to be a believer, then believe. Trust God. This is what he will tell you if he responds to your complaint. If he said it to the prophets, why does he need to say it again to you, unless it is because you refuse to listen?

If we challenge God as some of the biblical characters did, even though God has

stated and recorded his answers, then we test his patience. It shows that we have no respect for the Bible, and behave as if it does not exist. There is no justification, then, to vent our complaints and frustrations, because God has already responded to them in the words of the Bible. He rebuked Job, and Job repented: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more….I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 40:4-5, 42:2). The prophets learned their lessons and corrected their errors. We learn the same lessons by reading about them in the Bible, and not by repeating the same behavior that incited God's anger and rebuke.

Honesty does not translate into unrestrained expression of every negative thought and emotion in prayer. Scripture also insists on the Christian's duty to uphold knowledge and self-control. In Psalm 42, the writer says in agony, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (v. 9-10). But he immediately confronts his own attitude and says, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (v. 11). John MacArthur observes, "In this active introspection the psalmist rebukes himself for his despondency."[45]

To enrich our inner life, we must practice this active introspection. It is Christian contemplation or meditation. There is no mystical element in this kind of meditation, and it is very different from non-Christian or New Age meditation. Christian contemplation does not aim to empty the mind and suspend logic, but it aims to fill the mind and apply logic. It does not repudiate rationality to achieve mystical union with the divine, but it embraces rationality to think God's thoughts. It does not wait for spontaneous insights or personal revelations, but it achieves understanding through deliberate and rigorous reasoning founded on the revelation of Scripture. Christian contemplation or meditation is nothing other than active thinking controlled by the words of Scripture. This kind of meditation is intentional, rational, and scriptural.

Christian meditation involves intense thinking and reasoning, but thinking and reasoning that is grounded upon biblical revelation as its sole foundation. As Edmund Clowney writes, "For man to receive God's wisdom, it is not enough for God to display his wisdom in his works. He must also set forth his wisdom in his words….Divine and heavenly mysteries are revealed to us in God-given words.

Meditation centers on God's revelation, his Word."[46] If you wish to grow in your spiritual life, then you must enrich your inner life, and this kind of contemplation or meditation is what you must do.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Some people interpret this to mean that we should not think at all, and that we should not reason about our situation. However, Proverbs 22:19-21 teaches that if you trust in God, then you must think, but the difference is in what you think: "So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?" To "lean not on your own understanding" does not mean to stop thinking, but it means to stop relying on what you can come up with and to begin relying on the words of the Bible. To trust in God is to trust what the Bible says.

To the extent that your mind has not been renewed by the truth, it would be as if there are two voices in your mind – one reflects the assumptions and dispositions that were central before your conversion, and the other reflects the voice of knowledge and rationality, founded on the words of Scripture. In Psalm 42, the writer challenges his own mind: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (v. 11). He would not allow his mind to wander in just any direction, but he confronts himself with biblical knowledge. His troubled state of mind comes from feeling and experience, but he confronts himself with an authoritative voice that comes from biblical revelation. Instead of encouraging his emotions, he questions and challenges them.

The non-Christian culture favors the free expression of emotions, but the Bible teaches self-control. This is not to encourage what is called "repression," in which case the thoughts are merely suppressed so as not to appear before one's consciousness, and doing this will supposedly cause problems later. Rather, in biblical contemplation or meditation we confront these thoughts and resolve them:

> The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question

> yourself….And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do….
>
> The essence of this matter is to understand that this self of ours, this other man within us, had got to be handled. Do not listen to him; turn on him; speak to him; condemn him; upbraid him; exhort him; encourage him; remind him of what you know, instead of listening placidly to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you.[47]

Psalm 119:59 says, "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies" (NKJV). One turns to God by thinking, not praying, because even praying presupposes thinking:

> Before you can speak a single word of prayer, you have to think. You have to use your mind. You need to know who you're praying to. You need to know what you're praying for. You need to know the basis on which you are offering these prayers. So if your prayers are real, and not just some ritual of thoughtless words, they will involve you in a vigorous use of your understanding….When you actually speak with [the Lord], you will spend all the riches of your intelligence in thoughtfully adoring, praising, petitioning and thanking him. [48]

It follows that if "all the riches of your intelligence" amounts to nothing, then you cannot pray at all. It also follows that to increase the effectiveness of your prayer life, you must first work on the intellect. And when you pray, you must continue to ask God for wisdom and understanding:

> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (Ephesians 1:17)
>
> For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:9)

> If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

Christian contemplation consists of the purposeful interaction of your mind with the mind of God, or the words of the Bible, and the application of the wisdom that you gain from this to your life. It involves intense theological thinking.

Reading is one way to fuel our thinking with biblical content. If you say that you have learned something from a book, many people assume it means that you do not really know it. They think that you can read about something all you want, but you do not know it until you have done it or experienced it. However, the Bible itself is a book, and no Christian should say that he does not know or believe that there is a heaven until he experiences it. In fact, if he says this, then he will probably never know if there is a heaven, because he might experience the fires of hell instead. Jesus tells us, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2). If you consider your experience more reliable than the words of Christ, then you have no basis to call yourself a Christian.

Richard de Bury says, "A library of wisdom is more precious than all wealth, and all things that are desirable cannot be compared to it. Whoever therefore claims to be zealous of truth, of happiness, of wisdom or knowledge, aye even of the faith, must needs become a lover of books."[49] The Bible is a book, and it is the only infallible standard of truth by which all knowledge is founded, and by which all things are measured. If we are to be effective in faith and in learning, we must have more respect for books – surely not the contents of all books, but the idea of reading and learning from books.

We must be eager to study the Bible, to read the works of those who faithfully expound on its doctrines and passages, and to hear their sermons and lectures. The content for our thinking comes from reading and listening, and these become part of our contemplation, because we think as we read and listen. But we must continue to practice contemplation even when we are not reading a book or listening to a sermon. Spiritual insight often does not come without thinking, but God grants us wisdom and knowledge as we think about his revelation and reason with it. As Paul writes, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7).

The writer of Psalm 119 thinks on God's law "all day long" (v. 97), and because of this, he is wiser than his enemies and his teachers. Some will complain that there is no time to think about theology all day along, but as W. Bingham Hunter writes, "In contrast to Jesus, most of us are too busy coping with existence to see prayer as vital or essential. But life *could* be more simple. An older car, a less trendy wardrobe, reupholstered rather than replaced furniture, a little less meat on the table – changes like this could reduce the need for so much income and perhaps provide more time for prayer."[50]

Whereas we should relax our hold on these things in order to better our spiritual life, many people strive to better their spiritual life precisely because they wish to tighten their hold on these things. But Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). If you assume, perhaps even without being aware of it, that life consists in the abundance of possessions, then you have fallen into greed. Alas, for many people, once we restrain their desire for material things, they lose their motivation to pray.

God commands his people, "Give careful thought to your ways" (Haggai 1:5). Think about your life. There are things that you can do first to free up time without compromising your standard of living. If you will stop socializing with unproductive and unspiritual people except to preach the gospel to them, if you will stop watching so much television or reading newspapers and magazines, and if you will stop investing so much resources to sports, music, and all kinds of recreation, then you will instantly gain many hours of free time every week. Then again, it might be necessary for you to make more drastic changes. If you refuse to make any changes and to discipline yourself, then you are not serious about the Christian faith, and perhaps you are not even a Christian, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

---

[44] "What answer I am to make to the *reproof* which I anticipate from God on account of the liberty of my expostulation with Him." *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*; Zondervan, 1961; p. 829.
[45] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*; Thomas Nelson Bibles, 1997; p. 780.
[46] Edmund P. Clowney, *Christian Meditation*; Regent College Publishing, 2002 (original: 1979); p. 21-22.
[47] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 (original: 1965); p. 21.
[48] *What Happens When I Pray?*; Grace Publications Trust, 1997; p. 38.
[49] Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*; IndyPublish, 2002 (original: 1473).
[50] Hunter, *God Who Hears*; p. 189-190.