

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

"Prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us. Moreover, God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them." (Lord's Day 45 Heidelberg Catechism)

A series of articles on prayer by Rev C Bouwman. These articles appeared in "*Una Sancta*" during 1996 and 1997

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The Possibility of Prayer

So many of us find praying a difficult and frustrating exercise. To our feeling, our prayers bounce off the ceiling; God just doesn't seem to hear. We're sure: God is too busy directing this world and fighting evil to pay attention to *me*. And: with so many other millions praying at the same time, who am I that God should listen to sinful *me*?! We're sure, our prayers bounce off the ceiling....

In this article I wish to consider the question of why prayer is possible. I wish to draw out that God in Jesus Christ has restored the bond with God we broke in Paradise, and so we can freely speak with God again.

Covenant

Triune God had existed by Himself from all eternity. Though never lonely, it pleased Him –Father, Son, and Holy Spirit– to create a world. The crown of His creating work was the formation of the creature man. With this creature, and with this creature alone, the Almighty Creator made a covenant. The covenant which the Creator made with the creature man implied that there now existed –by God's sovereign decree– a relation of friendship and mutual interest between God and man. So it was that God spoke to man, told Adam and Eve in Paradise particular things, told them for example where they were to live, what they were to do, why they existed. Indeed, it was the Lord's practice to visit Adam and Eve in their garden in the "cool of the day" (Gen 3:8).

Yet it wasn't only so that God would speak to man; man was also to speak to God. God came to Adam and Eve in the Garden, and that gave Adam and Eve opportunity to praise their Visitor for what He had made; they'd spent the day working with God's creation, admiring it, and so were confronted with

His glory (Ps 19). When He came to visit, they could speak with God, tell Him what they thought of His handiwork, could tell Him also about what they did in His world in the course of the day, yes, could also ask Him for information when they ran stuck in their gardening. The point is: there was open communication between God and man. The Creator would talk with the creature man, and that creature would talk with his Creator. The Creator was genuinely interested in the thoughts and concerns, the ups and downs, of the creature man, for God had established His covenant with man, had made Himself their Father. That open communication from the creature to the Creator, from the child to the Father: *that is prayer*.

The Fall

Where does our problem with praying come from then? *It comes from our fall into sin*. For in our fall into sin, we broke our covenant with God in favour of establishing a bond with Satan. We broke that covenant with God, and in so doing made it impossible for ourselves to *speak with God*. God came to Adam and Eve after they fell, but –say the Scriptures– when "they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day..., the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Gen 3:8). What Adam and Eve did not want after their fall was to speak with God; they were mortally afraid of God. And that was not because *God* had changed; it was rather because they had *themselves* changed. By their fall into sin, they had as it were slapped their Father across the face, rejected Him. And now meet Him, speak with Him as if nothing had happened?! No, their guilty conscience prevented that. They *could* not talk with God, *could not pray*.

Redemption

Here now is the marvel: the sovereign Creator who had graciously formed a Father/child relation with the creature man, "called to" the fallen man (Gen 3:9). Though man had made it impossible to speak to God, *God yet wished to speak to man*. As the Church has summarised it in the *Belgic Confession*: "when [man] trembling fled from Him", "our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man" (Art 17). God in mercy wished a restoration of the broken relationship, wished to speak with man, wished man to speak with Him. God had no delight in that broken covenant.

God sought out His unfaithful covenant partner. He spoke to Adam and Eve words of grace: I will destroy Satan, I will deliver you from the misery and death into which you plunged yourselves, and I will re-establish the covenant with you which you broke, I will once again make you My children and I will be your Father (Gen 3:15). *Here is the gospel of redemption*: the seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent, and the blessed result of that redemption would be that sinners would be reconciled to God, so reconciled that the warm relation of the beginning would be restored. In a word: *we can speak with God again, can pray!*

Result

So it happened. The seed of the woman –Jesus Christ– fought with the devil on Calvary, defeated Him, ransomed a lost people from the power of the devil. That lost people was reconciled to God, was made again children of God. So *complete* is the restoration which Christ obtained on the cross that these redeemed sinners are allowed to speak with God *just as Adam and Eve spoke with God in the beginning*. As Adam and Eve knew no fear of God in Paradise, so God's people today need not know any fear in speaking to God. As Adam and Eve knew no inhibitions, but could –free of sin as they were– speak openly with God, so we who have been redeemed by Christ may speak openly with God, may tell the Lord what is on our minds. Through the blood of Christ our sins are gone, so that nothing hinders our access to God (Eph 2:18). The apostle to the Hebrews puts it this way: we have boldness "to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19). "The Holiest" is a reference to God's presence, to God Himself. By the blood of the Saviour, we are permitted into God's holy presence. That being the case, the apostle continues, "let us draw near" (vs 22). The apostle would not have us hesitate, would instead have us freely enter the presence of God to speak with Him, to pray. In fact, Jesus Himself is ever in heaven now to intercede on behalf of those for whom He died. That being the

case, we are now "commanded to call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator" (Art 26). Thanks to the work of the Christ, speaking with our Creator may now characterise the life of the Christian.

Answered

And the promise is this: *God shall hear what we wish to say to Him*. Almighty God is keenly interested in those for whom He once gave up His only Son. If He loved us so much that He gave up His Son for our salvation, will He now *not* hear us when we speak to Him?!! It's the promise of the Saviour: "ask, and it will be given you.... For every one who asks receives.... Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ...If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Mt 7:7ff). And: "Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13f). In Paul's words: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

Content

In light of what the Receiver of our prayers has done in order to make prayer possible, what shall we say to this God? Our habit tends to be to keep prayers rather general. We'll pray for food, for work, for the children, for a blessing on our club meeting, a blessing for the church and the officebearers, we'll pray for the sick and mission and the school and the persecuted and the poor. That's all good. But consider for a moment: are *these* the things that are important to you? Sure, food and work, church and mission are important, and need certainly to receive a place in our conversations with the Father in heaven. But we all know that there come moments when other things are more pressing on our minds than these things. We're running late because we're slept in, we're frustrated because we can't get to sleep, the toast is burnt and what's Dad going to say: these and so many more little things are the nuts and bolts of daily living, the things that take up so much of our mind and our time. Our thought is: God is not interested in these sorts of petty things; it's irreverent to mention such things to Almighty God and to ask Him for strength to cope. Yet we need to recall: even "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Mt 10:30). That is: our Father in Jesus Christ most certainly is interested even in *these little things*.. Very well, let us talk to Him then not only about work and children, church and mission; let us talk to Him also about the toast, about the sleep in, about the – whatever is on our minds. And ask for the strength that's needed in the circumstances. Remember: the Bible does not divide life into two parts, one part that interests God and another part that doesn't. The Catechism says it this way: God has commanded us to ask of Him "all the things we need for body and soul." That's comprehensive, it excludes nothing.

Conclusion

We have those moments when we feel as if our prayers bounce off the ceiling. We need to bear in mind *who our God is*. Adam and Eve in Paradise could speak freely and openly with their covenant God about whatever was on their minds. Because of Jesus' work on the cross, we may do so too. And He hears – regardless of how we feel. Nothing is too big for a mention in our conversations with God; nothing is too small for a mention either. Father wants to hear what's on the minds of His children. "You are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt 10:31).

Hindrances to Prayer

The Lord God had established a covenant bond between Himself and mankind, so that Adam and Eve could speak openly and freely with Him about whatever was on their minds. The Fall into sin ruined that open lines of communication between man and God. In His abundant mercy, though, God the Creator gave His Son to pay for sin, and the result that God's people may boldly come into His presence to speak to the Creator of heaven and earth. This God is so interested in His children that He

would have us speak with Him of all that's important to us at any moment of the day. This was the material of the previous submission on the possibility of prayer.

The fact that God has opened up the channels of communication between us and God, however, does not mean that these channels are *always* open. We remain sinners, and through our sins can hinder communication with God.

Sin hinders Prayer

When God came to Adam and Eve after their fall into sin, Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God" (Gen 3:8). They had no desire to speak to God. That was not because God had changed; it was rather because they had themselves become sinful. *It was their own identity as sinners that made praying impossible for them.*

The apostle Peter writes about this very matter when he discusses the relation between husbands and wives. Peter says this:

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with [your wives] with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, *that your prayers may not be hindered*" (I Pet 3:7).

The implication of the apostle's words is evident: friction in marriage hinders prayer.

The concept of friction frustrating prayer is not new with Peter. The Lord Jesus Christ had spoken in the same way in His Sermon on the Mount. Said Jesus:

"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23f).

The altar of the OT, we need to recall, is symbolic of prayer (cf Ps 141:2). Jesus' instruction is to forego praying in favour of first patching up differences with a brother. This instruction from the Saviour need not surprise us, nor strike us as overly rigid or pious. Though the fall into sin generated disharmony between God and man, God in grace saw to it that through Christ harmony should be restored; there is reconciliation with God for God's children. Those children now are renewed by the Spirit of Christ, and as such enabled to love each other as God has loved us. So it is that love for another is even the hallmark of the Christian: "by this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother" (I Jn 3:10). If I, then, am party to tension with a brother, I am party to something that is distinctly alien to the regenerated believer. Small wonder that God is unwilling to hear the prayer of someone who does not live in harmony with his brother or sister.

Self-examination

Do your prayers bounce off the ceiling? Do you find praying a difficult, frustrating exercise? Please, dear reader, we may do well to look at our own lives. Is our relation with the neighbour, be it in marriage or outside of marriage, pleasing to God, in keeping with the renewal promised for those saved by Christ's blood? Do you live at loggerheads with your spouse, your children, your parents, your brothers and sisters in the faith, with anyone? It is God's wish that we, before we pray, do all within our power to be reconciled with our neighbour. Jesus in that passage quoted earlier from Mt 5 did not say that the fault of the friction has to be my own before I do something about it; Jesus rather spoke about your brother having something against you. In that circumstance, said Jesus, you are to go and be reconciled; else your prayers will be hindered.

Admittedly, in this sinful world not every dispute can be cleaned up as ought. But do our best to resolve the tensions that be we must. Consider what the apostle writes in I Jn 3: "we receive from [God

] whatever we ask" –when?– "if our hearts do not condemn us." And when is that? When "we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him" (vss 21f). In the matter of tensions, God's command is that we do whatever we can to resolve them. To quote Paul: "if possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Rom 12:18).

Unconfessed Sin

Yet it is not only friction, lack of love towards others, that hinders prayer. Praying is made difficult, yes, impossible, also when the person praying embraces habits of living that are contrary to the commands of the One to whom he prays. God wishes to hear His children in prayer, God is so interested in them that He has promised to hear. But what now if the children of God do not *act like* children of God? What if those with whom God has established His covenant, His gracious Father-child relationship, choose to live like those who have a bond with Satan? We understand: then God does not hear that prayer, does not answer. As a Christian parent is not going to comply with the requests from his son who lives in blatant sin, so God too is not going to answer the requests of those covenant children of His who demonstrate in their lifestyle that they have no regard for Him. It's what James says: "you ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (4:3).

Conclusion

Sin in our lives hinders prayer. In the face of difficulties with prayer, we do well not to look in first instance at different techniques of praying (as if there is a "How to" book on prayer); we do well to look first at our personal lives. I need to consider: God has made me His child. I need, then, to be different than the world. Am I? My Father in Jesus Christ certainly wishes me to be different. So: am I? If not, if my habits and attitudes parallel those of the children of Satan, I need not at all be surprised that I find praying frustrating, find heaven closed to my prayers, find my prayers bouncing off the ceiling. And it will not improve either, *unless I repent*.

Prayer: to Whom do I Pray?

The Lord Jesus prayed much, spoke with His Father in heaven. His disciples saw Him pray, possibly heard what He said. So it happened one day that, when Jesus was finished praying, one of the disciples said to Him: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John [the Baptist] also taught his disciples [to pray]" (Luke 11:1). "Teach us to pray," they said. From the question we conclude that the disciples had difficulties with prayer. We're not told the nature of their struggles with prayer, but we may be sure that their struggles were not radically different from the struggles we encounter with prayer.

Jesus' answer was this: "When you pray, say..." – and there follows the familiar Lord's Prayer. We are to note: Jesus did not answer the disciples' question by advising *techniques*. I mention this fact because we live today in an age of mysticism and meditation, with various gurus telling us about different ways of sitting and stretching and what to eat and what music to listen to in order to reach the 'other world'. Jesus does not speak of a *technique*; He instead teaches His disciples to pray by giving them a model prayer.

Jesus' intent with this model prayer was *not* that the disciples use precisely these 37 words (37 in the original language) each time they pray. Jesus did not intend this prayer to be used a magical incantation that opens the doors of heaven every time the disciples voiced this prayer. Rather, with this model prayer Jesus gave instruction to His disciples on the *how* of praying. The point for us is that we need to understand the content of the words Jesus included in this prayer.

To Whom does one Pray?

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In His answer Jesus first of all sought to instruct His disciples about Who it was to whom they prayed. Said Jesus: "When you pray, say: Father...." If the disciples have difficulty praying, they need to have fixed in their minds *to whom they are praying*.

After all: to whom we speak determines what we say and how we say it. To a stranger we do not say the same things as we do to a friend. Similarly, if the person in front of you is a police officer, you talk in a different way and tell him different things, than if you were talking to your father. Again, the person in front of you can be your father, but the relation you have to your father and your perception of him as a person and as a father, determines how freely you talk and what you talk about. Now Jesus says to His disciples: when you pray, realise that the God to whom you speak is *Father*.

"Father"

No doubt all twelve disciples could well relate to the notion of 'Father'. For all we know, some of these disciples may at this time themselves have been fathers. Yet, to call God 'Father' is not necessarily an easy thing. We all know that our own fathers are not (or were not) always so very approachable and understanding. In fact, we can see with ourselves certain failures and shortcomings that make it difficult for our children to speak openly to us. So also the disciples; they may well have had fathers that were short-tempered, unfeeling, too busy for their children, may even have had fathers who mistreated, abused their children. Yet, when the disciples asked Jesus for lessons in how to pray, Jesus told them to address God as *Father*, and He did that even though Jesus well knew what sort of failures earthly fathers can be.

Why was it, then, that Jesus told His disciples to address God as *Father*? How does addressing God as 'Father' help prayer? Jesus, we are to know, did not appeal to the disciples' *experiences* of what a father is. Rather, with the instruction to address God as 'Father', Jesus opened the Scriptures of the OT, built on that which God had revealed in the OT about Himself as Father. Of the various places in the OT where God is presented as a Father, I draw your attention to the first occurrence of the word in relation to God: Deuteronomy 32, the "Song of Moses".

The Song of Moses

The Song of Moses finds its setting on the banks of the Jordan River, after Israel had spent forty years in the desert. On the other side of the river was the Promised Land. At this point in history, Moses taught Israel a song. In the song, Moses spelled out once again *who* the Lord was. Says he concerning God:

"Is He not your Father, who bought you?
Has He not made you and established you?" (6b).

Israel in Egypt was no people, and God called them into existence as a separate nation when He rescued them from Egypt and made His covenant with them at Sinai. "Is He not your Father"; that is: are you not children of God? Has God not ransomed you from bondage to Pharaoh and adopted you to be His own children? Did God not give to you a new identity, make you His own? Is your origin not from God, your very existence rooted in Him; "Is He not your father?" God's Fatherhood, however, refers to more than the fact that He 'fathered' Israel. Moses depicts God, Israel's Father, as having found an unwanted child discarded in the wilderness (vs 10). Unlike the actual father—who discarded Israel—the Lord acted as a true father:

"He encircled him,
He instructed him,
He kept him as the apple of His eye."

Here is real care, concern, interest. The phrase 'apple of his eye' is a reference to one's eyeball. If there is any part of the body that is open to danger and yet protected, it is the eye. Even before it registers in one's brain that a speck of dirt is sailing toward the eye, the eyelid instinctively flutters shut, protects. Such is the care which the Lord God gives to that rejected child He found in the howling waste of the wilderness. Again, the fact that God is father implies *more* than that He cares for His children so sensitively. Vs 11: "As an eagle stirs up its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings," so does the Lord. The reference is to the parent eagle that not

only cares for its young (and so feeds); that parent eagle also teaches its offspring, teaches it particularly how to fly. The nest of an eagle is built off the ground, either in a tall tree or toward the top of a cliff edge. To teach her young to fly, the eagle simply pushes the grown chicks out of the nest. The young either fly or fall. If indeed they fall, the hen swoops down under the falling chick and catches it on her back, then brings it back to the nest to try again another time. Now Moses says: so also is God your Father. He is Father, and as such He understands the needs of His children, and gives them what they need. The eagle understands the need of her young to learn how to fly, and so teaches them, and meanwhile cares for them as she teaches. The Father in heaven understands the needs of His people, and so teaches them, and meanwhile is ever and always caring for His own. His is a teaching in love, instruction designed to make Israel mature in their faith, stand on their own feet: Father. It was after Israel has spent 40 years in the desert that Moses identified God as Father for the first time. Had the evidence been such that the Lord indeed cared, that He also always taught, and taught in an understanding and caring way? Sure, there were times when Israel was certain that they were being unfairly treated, even rejected by God. *But that's exactly the point!* The young eagles undoubtedly don't enjoy getting pushed out of the nest into the big blue either; they'll resist, screech, feel rejected. Yet the mother eagle educates and trains for the benefit of her brood. That's what parenting is all about. And the experience of Israel at the end of 40 years in the desert served to underline that same truth; God, their Father, understood His children and taught, instructed, them accordingly.

That's what a Father is. The way God treated Israel, even from the day of her birth, was *one gigantic exhibition of what it meant that God was a Father for this people.* The fact that He was 'Father' meant that their every need was provided; Israel never lacked a thing, even in the desert. He was 'Father', and that meant that God trained, God educated His people. God's interest in Israel went beyond protecting them and providing for their needs; God wanted His children to grow to mature service of Him, trust Him, love Him. That, says God, is what the word *Father* entails.

When You Pray, Say 'Father'

The disciples ask Jesus to "teach us to pray." Jesus' answer is: when you pray, know that you are speaking to *Father*. Says Jesus: the God you address is not a cruel tyrant that you should tremble in His presence. Nor is He a stranger that you should be tongue-tied. And He's not a scarcely interested acquaintance whom you're actually bothering by your small talk. Rather, He is *Father*. No, not like your earthly fathers, with all their sins and failures. He is 'Father' according to the instruction of Deuteronomy 32; He is the God who has always cared for your grandparents in the desert, who always understood their needs, who taught His children-by-covenant; He is the God who has always been *most interested* in His people. Says Jesus: God is not remote from you, Peter, Andrew, Nathaniel, Thomas, and the rest of you. God is not detached from you, God is not hard-hearted; God is '*Father*'. So: talk to Him! Openly, freely. You, Peter, John, Judas, Matthew, you know your Bibles. You know what God has revealed about Himself. Know Him, then, for *Who He is*, and speak to Him in that way. He is Father in the biblical sense of the word. Tell Him freely what is on your minds; He's interested, He understands.

Conclusion

We understand: Jesus' answer to His disciples was wonderful in its content. 'Father', as the term is defined in the Song of Moses, gives a very positive perception of Who God is, a picture that makes speaking with this God far easier than if He were cold-hearted, heavy fisted, uninterested.

How, then, do we go about praying? No, we do not use special formulae, special words, special techniques in an effort to 'get through'. Instead, we believe *who God is*. Since the Lord God is Father – as described in Deuteronomy 32, and *highlighted by His gift of Jesus Christ for our sakes*– we can speak with Him openly and freely.

The Focus of Prayer: for the Glory of God - 1

The disciples had some problems with praying. Though they'd been taught by their parents over the

years, and by the priests and teachers of their day no doubt too, they somehow did not feel at ease to speak with God. Was the problem that they didn't know what to say? Was the problem that they felt their prayers were bouncing off the ceiling? Whatever it was, they sought help: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

In His reply to the disciples' request, the Lord Jesus said this: "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your Name" – and the rest of the Lord's Prayer. The first item of Jesus' instruction about prayer was that the disciples should know *to whom* they were speaking. The fact that God is not a heavy fisted tyrant, the fact that He is instead a 'Father' as the word is defined by passages at Deut 32, makes speaking to Him far more attractive, easy.

Jesus' answer to His disciples did not stop with His instruction about *to whom* they were praying. Jesus continued His instruction by telling His disciples *what they were to pray about*. That is: Jesus gave instruction about what attitude they were to have in prayer, what the *focus* of their prayers was to be. It is the first petition that draws out Who is to be central to prayer: "Hallowed be Your Name." Not the self but God is to stand central in our speaking with Him. In what follows, I wish to draw out the Scriptural material behind this petition. A following instalment should draw out, in practical manner, the consequences of this instruction for our prayers.

Creation

God, three in One, had existed from all eternity. He alone, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was there, never lonely, never lacking anything, always sufficient in Himself, great beyond measure. It pleased this God to create a world. He did not do so because He was lonely. Nor did He do so because He was bored. He rather did so for the sake of His own good pleasure. I read in Isaiah 43 the following words:

"...I have created for My glory" (vs 7).

So it was that when the Lord laid the foundations of the earth, the angels broke out into songs of praise (Job 38:6f). These angels, themselves just recently created, saw the power and wisdom of almighty God in the works of His hand, and so burst out in songs of praise for this God of glory. The heavens themselves "declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). Indeed, God created the human race in His own image, created mankind to image Him, so that all creation might see the more what God is like and so praise and glorify Him. It's the purpose of every creature, an instruction given to all:

"Bless the Lord, all His works,
In all places of His dominion" (Psalm 103:22).

Redemption

Yes, there came the fall into sin. With the fall into sin God was no longer glorified by His handiwork, least of all by the human race. We may say it this way: with the fall into sin the first petition was frustrated; creation was no longer able to give to God the praise that was His due. Satan with his demons could gloat over the success of their vandalism.

But precisely because the Lord God was worthy to receive all glory, precisely because He had made the world for His own name's sake, the Lord could not leave His creation so defaced by sin. For the sake of His own Name and the glory of His holy reputation, the Lord sought out our fallen parents from behind the shrubs of Paradise and proclaimed to them the redemption He promised to give in Jesus Christ. He wished to redeem the elect from the power of the devil –why?– "to the praise of the glory of His grace" – says Paul in Ephesians 1:5f.

This, then, is the reason why the world exists, is the reason why you, dear reader, exist, and why I exist too: we are here, the world is here, *for the glory of God!* I do not exist for me, you do not exist for your own pleasure; you and I and all creatures are here for the glory of God. I exist for God, and therefore everything I do –from things big to things small, be it writing out a cheque for the church or paying for

a hamburger at Hungry Jacks– everything I do is to be directed to the glory of God. I exist for God, and so my life is to be God-centred. I Cor 10:

"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (vs 31).

I am not here for me, you are not here for yourself, and therefore there is no room for selfishness in our lives. *I* may not be the centre of my existence; central to my existence must be *God*. It's for Him that I exist in the first place.

Hallowed be Your name

Well now: if God is to be central to my life, if all I do is to be directed to the glory of God –including something so common and this-worldly as eating and drinking– if all I do is to be directed to the glory of God, surely *my prayers need also to be directed to the glory of God*. If the very purpose of my existence is the glory of God, it's just not acceptable for me to pray with myself as the focus of my prayer.

This is the notion that Jesus placed before His disciples when He addressed them on the content of prayer. The disciples wanted to know how to pray. Said Jesus: "when you pray, say: 'Hallowed be Your Name.'" Said Jesus: when you pray, make sure God is the focus of your speaking with Him, ask God to make His glorious reputation more glorious yet. Says Jesus to Peter and to Nathanael and to Andrew and to the rest: God's glory is the thought that's to dominate your prayers, that's the thought that determines the focus of your praying. Says Jesus to the twelve: praying is not that you come to God with a list of your personal requirements (as you see them); praying is that you come to God *with God's glory in mind*: 'Hallowed be *Your* name.'

The application of this instruction to our own prayers will be dealt with in the next article.

The Focus of Prayer: for the Glory of God - 2

In response to their request about prayer, Jesus reminded His disciples' that all of life is to be focused on God and His greater glory. No one exists for himself; God has created all creatures for His greater glory. So, whether one eats or drinks, gets dressed or makes a purchase, all is to be done to the glory of God. Since all of life is to be God-centred, it follows that speaking with God is also to be God-centred.

That reality needs to be worked out concretely. As it is, so many of our prayers to God focus on ourselves. What is a God-centred prayer to look like? How am I, in the concrete circumstances of my life, to pray according to the Lord's instruction in the first petition?

Jesus' Example

A couple of days before He had to go to the cross, Jesus spoke with the Father according to His own instruction in the first petition. Jesus verbalised the actual circumstances of His life with these words: "Now My soul is troubled" (John 12:27). That is: Jesus was not looking forward to the coming cross with its horrors and pains and sufferings.

Because He looked up against the cross, Jesus asked a question of Himself: "What shall I say?" He conversed within Himself: "Shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour, spare Me from the cross?'" Please note what the point of Jesus' discussion with Himself was. Jesus was considering whether He should look after His own interests, His own safety first, or not. He's a true man, and He looked up against the horrors of the cross in the same way we would. Hence His question: "Shall I say: 'Lord, it's all too much, I can't stomach the coming horrors of Calvary; save Me from this hour?'" Now note Jesus' answer to His own question. He does not begin to pray with Himself as the focus of His prayer. Jesus does not do that because He knows He may not do so. Jesus knows the Scripture: He, as all creation, exists for the glory of God.

Since life revolves around the God who created life for the sake of His own glory, Jesus determines what to do. Says He: 'No, I'll not pray for Myself; I shall instead pray that first petition: Father, glorify Your Name, hallowed be Your Name.' Jesus prays here according to the prayer He taught His own disciples to pray. He prays on the eve of His betrayal and sufferings on the cross with *God*, God's *glory*, in the centre of His attention. Here is nothing selfish; here is instead total self-denial. *God* was to be glorified. So Jesus laid Himself at God's disposal. Father, He says, here I am; lead Me down whatever track You want, do with Me whatever You wish, as long as Your name is glorified and praised through what I may do. That's His prayer: "Father, glorify Your name." Self-denial.

And see: Jesus' prayer is answered!! Did He not say, "Ask, and it will be given"? (Luke 11). Jesus asked that God's name be glorified. And lo, it happened! To Jesus' prayer heaven straightaway responded, responded with delight. Said the voice: "I have both glorified it, and I will glorify it again." Here was promised that God would direct things in such a way that God's Son would indeed be triumphant on Calvary. Christ's triumph on the cross would bring glory to God, glory because Satan would be defeated, yes, and thousands upon thousands chosen to life would be redeemed from Satan's power, forgiven of their sins and justified before God. Truly, that's glory for God!

Our Prayers

How, now, shall we pray? The point is clear: central to our prayer cannot be our personal desires. Yes, central to our *lives* cannot be ourselves. The focus of our prayer is to be God, His glory, His praise. That requires denying the self, setting the self aside as Jesus did in John 12. No, that does not mean that our personal circumstances may not feature in our prayers. Our personal circumstances very much need to feature in our prayers. Whether I eat or drink, whether I seek a life partner or go to work or do some painting or clean up behind the children: I am to do all not with the self in mind, but with God in mind. In my specific circumstances I may speak to my God about where I'm at, tell Him my troubles and joys. Yet as I tell Him my concerns, as I pray for strength, as I lay before Him my longing for a life partner or my frustration with the always needing to clean up behind the children, it is not *myself* or *my* happiness that is to be central to my thinking nor to my prayer nor even to my desires. As I tell Him my concerns, as I pray for strength in my circumstances, it is *His glory* that is to be the focus of my thinking, my prayer, my desires.

The angel Gabriel once appeared to Mary with the news that she would become pregnant even though she had no husband. Socially, such a pregnancy was highly embarrassing. Gabriel made it clear to Mary: the Lord wanted to use her to bring His Son into the world. Her response? "Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Here was no concern with self; here was instead self-denial for the sake of the Lord God. That's the attitude, that's the focus Jesus teaches in the first petition. That's the attitude, that's the focus our lives –and hence our prayers– are to have. 'Lord, here I am in my specific circumstances, at Your disposal, available for Your greater glory. Here I am, Lord; use me to hallow Your name.'

Answered

So many of us wonder why we have trouble praying, wonder why our prayers are not answered, wonder why we have the impression that our prayers bounce off the ceiling. We ask, and don't receive; we seek, and don't find; we knock, and it's not opened to us – contrary to Jesus' promise in Luke 11! I wonder: is this because we ask with *ourselves* in the centre of our prayers? The apostle James once wrote this: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (4:3).

Jesus promised that those who ask would receive. We need to bear in mind, though, that these words about asking and receiving were spoken immediately after Jesus gave His instruction about praying. It is illegitimate to assume that we'll receive what we ask for if our asking is not according to the instruction of the Lord's Prayer. Specific to the first petition: our focus in prayer must be *God*, and if then we ask for something, *then* it will be granted. That's the promise.

Setting of Prayer: Life is War - 1

According to Luke 11, the disciples once witnessed Jesus speaking to His Father in heaven. When Jesus finished praying, one of the disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." The disciples had trouble with prayer, didn't quite know what to say, felt they had problem getting through to God. Jesus complied with their request, taught His disciples how to pray. Said Jesus: "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your Name. Your kingdom come." With this second petition Jesus instructs His disciples to speak to their heavenly Father from the context of their daily existence – which is *war*.

"Your kingdom come." Those words imply that God's kingdom is not here yet; if it were here, one would not need to pray that God's kingdom may please come.

God's Kingship

Here we need to bear in mind two realities. On the one hand, the Bible portrays God in Christ as being sovereign Master of the universe. I think of Ps 24:

"The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness,

The world and those who dwell therein" (vs 1).

I think also of Jesus' words to His disciples:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Mt 28:18).

And Peter's words on the day of Pentecost:

"...let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

OT and NT alike agree: God is king today over all the world.

Rebellion

But there is a second reality. In this fallen world, not all in God's kingdom *acknowledge* God as king. That is: within the perimeters of God's kingdom (that's all the world) are those who rebel against God, who deny His kingship, who seek to dethrone God. Within God's kingdom are dissidents, and they battle against God, they engage in both open warfare against God as well as in guerilla activities in their efforts to claim the kingdom for their chief.

I speak, of course, of the revolt against God begun by Satan in the beginning. The Scriptures speak of "angels who sinned" (II Pet 2:4) under the leadership of the angel Satan; those fallen angels are now known as demons. Satan was not content with his place under God, he wished to dethrone God and claim God's glory for Himself. After His rebellion against God, Satan tempted Adam and Eve in Paradise, with as result that the first man and the first lady of the world joined Satan in his rebellion against God; Adam and Eve refused to acknowledge the kingship and authority of God their Creator (Gen 3:1ff).

Enmity

God, though, did not rest content with this rebellion in the world He created for His own glory. He sought out the man and his wife in Paradise, and came to them with the gospel. Said God to Satan in the hearing of Adam and Eve:

"...I will put enmity

Between you and the woman,

And between your seed and her Seed;

He shall bruise your head,

And you shall bruise His heel" (Gen 3:15).

That is: God declared war on the rebel Satan. Though the devil had managed to get the world for himself, God was not content with such a state of affairs. God declared war, God placed "enmity", hatred, strife, contention between Satan on the one hand and the woman on the other. More, God promised that in this strife, this enmity, bruising would occur, bruising that would even cause death. Life on earth would not be sweat and idyllic; life would be warfare, battles, hatred.

So it happened. By the grace of God, Adam and Eve were returned to God's side, delivered from the clutches of the devil. Their first born son, however, had no desire to serve the King of kings; Cain allied himself with Satan against God. Such was the hatred and the strife of this mortal life that this first-born rose up against his brother and killed him. That is life: bloodshed, hatred, strife, jealousy, murder. Life is war, civil war; brother rises up against brother, children against parents, parents against children. Here is in practice what God decreed after the fall in Paradise: life is *enmity*.

The OT is full of examples of that enmity. The apostasy in the days of Noah, the doubts in Abraham's mind about the child God promised, the jealousy amongst the brothers in Jacob's tent, the bondage of God's covenant people in Egypt, Israel's murmuring and grumbling in the desert, their readiness to give themselves to the idols of Canaan, Saul's hatred against his anointed successor David – on and on goes the OT, pointing up the bitter reality that enmity, strife, warfare characterises this life.

Christmas: war continued

In the fullness of time God sent His only Son to earth. Yes, the angels sang in the fields of Bethlehem of "glory to God in the highest" –the first petition!– sang also of peace on earth (Luke 2:14). But their intent was not to communicate to mankind that warfare had come to an end, that life was strife no longer. Said Jesus to His disciples:

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household'" (Mt 10:34ff).

No, Christmas has not meant an end to the warfare that has characterised life on earth since Paradise. In fact, the Lord is emphatic that the warfare of the OT has become even more brutal, more sinister, more subtle in the NT dispensation. The apostle John is shown a vision relating to the victory of Christ on the cross of Calvary. He says it like this, Rev 12:

"And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (vs 7ff)

We read that, and we say: yes, that's triumph for God in Christ against the enemy Satan; he's cast out of heaven, defeated – Hallelujah! That's the victory of Calvary!

Up the Ante!

But we would be so remiss if we concluded that herewith the enmity proclaimed in Gen 3 has come to an end! For Satan, though indeed cast out of heaven, has not yet been cast into hell. Says John further:

"*Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time*" (vs 12).

John is shown too what the devil does on earth:

"Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child" (vs 13).

True,

"the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent."

But that doesn't mean Satan knows no hatred anymore, doesn't mean that Satan does not continue to fight God and His kingdom. Vs 17:

" And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

That is the reality for the Church of Jesus Christ throughout the NT dispensation: that Church is hated fiercely by the devil, and Satan makes war with those who keep the commandments of God. The enmity and strife proclaimed in Gen 3 continues even till today. Though God in Christ has triumphed over the devil, defeated him, Satan does not admit defeat; he continues his attacks on the kingdom of God. Frontal attacks, guerilla activity, terrorist attacks: nothing is below the belt as far as the devil is concerned.

Danger is to us!

And notice, dear reader, *who* it is that Satan attacks. That last verse of Rev 12 spoke of his making war with "the rest of her offspring." Who are they? They are those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." You see: Satan does not send his demons against those who want nothing to do with God, doesn't attack the unbelievers and the heathens. In his sights are the *believers*, you and I! We who claim to love the Lord, we who have made profession of the faith, and the children of God by covenant whom God has entrusted to us: *we* are the persons targetted by the devil today. Let there be no mistake in our minds: we are hated by the devil and his demons, and that devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (to quote from I Peter 5:8), and he wants to devour *us* and our children. Hence the instruction of the apostle Paul to the church of all ages:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:10ff).

The demons are *here*, attacking God's own now in cruel rage, attacking *us*. That is the tragic reality of life in this fallen world; life was and still is warfare, cruel, hard, bitter warfare.

If we don't experience it that way, that's not because the Word of God is not accurate on this point, nor is it because the devil is concentrating his attacks elsewhere; if we don't experience it this way it's

rather because we are too sinful even to notice Satan's attacks – and too sinful too to notice (possibly) our collapsing in the face of his attacks.

Setting of Prayer: Life is War - 2

The disciples asked Jesus for instruction about prayer. After telling His disciples that their prayers need to be God-centred, Jesus proceeded to tell them that the warfare characterising this life was to receive a central place in the disciples' conversations with God. Said Jesus to them: ask God to make His kingdom come. That is: tell God that you are under attack, speak with God about the rebellion still being pushed by some of the creatures of God's creation. Said Jesus to His disciples: make sure that the enmity of which God spoke in Genesis 3 is part and parcel of your talking with God.

Perspective

We understand: if this subject is to be part and parcel of our talking with God –yes, and receives pride of place after the petition instructing us about God-centredness!– then this subject must of necessity determine also the way we view life as a whole. I may not think of my daily life in terms of peace and quiet, only to turn around and speak with God about life as war; I am rather to think of life in terms of warfare, of hatred, of strife, of ambush and attacks. And then, from my specific position in life, I am to speak to God about where I'm at, tell Him about my circumstances in the context of the warfare of which He speaks, the warfare going on around me.

That reality gives colour to prayers, adds perspective. The Lord has given me work, but the boys at work mock me terribly because I'm a Christian, go to church, don't appreciate pornography. The material behind the second petition gives me understanding for what is going on here; Satan would use the fellows at work to tear me from my God, to keep me away from church, to stop me from praying. So I tell God, tell Him of my struggles at work from the perspective of the second petition, from the perspective of Satan's ongoing hatred against the church and against me. 'Father,' I pray, 'You are King over all, worthy of all glory and praise. But in Your kingdom are those who refuse to acknowledge you, and I experience it so strongly at work. My work-mates mock my Christianity, yes, behind their mockery is Satan and his demons trying to lure me away from You and Your service. So I pray: make Your kingdom come! I pray: destroy the attacks of Satan against me, give me strength to acknowledge, publicly, that you are God on high! Give me strength to continue to pray even at work, to be faithful to you in my conduct. Father, Your kingdom come at work, Your kingdom come in my life.'

At home one of the children is rebellious. I understand: behind his rebellion is Satan's efforts to tear this covenant child away from his God. I analyse what's going on in the life of my child from the perspective of Satan's attacks, and I pray for my son from that perspective too: 'Lord, this child is Yours and therefore hated by Satan and his demons; please frustrate Satan's attacks, make Your kingdom come in the life of my son.'

There is strife in my marriage, my parents' marriage. The material behind the second petition gives perspective to what is going on: Satan would destroy the family, divide Mom and Dad so that parents cannot concentrate together on the task of teaching the children the way of the Lord. The TV and the home computer and the VCR take away from time to communicate with each other in the home: Satan would prevent parents from speaking with God's covenant children about the service of the Lord, would prevent children from telling their parents what is on their minds. So we pray, pray for good relations with the children, pray for good harmony in marriage, and as we pray it's the material of the second petition that's on our minds: 'Father, prevent Satan from destroying our family, be it through friction between persons of the family, be it through our being absorbed by entertainment that takes away time to talk, be it by infatuation with sport, etc. Father,' we pray, 'Your kingdom come. Rule us by Your Word and Spirit so that we in our home submit more and more to You; destroy Satan's attacks upon us.'

Work

We pray, with the reality of war in our minds. We understand: we don't just pray; we also work. After all: I cannot pray that God please make His kingdom come, and at the same time continue to tolerate sin in my life. I cannot pray that God make His kingdom come in my work situation, and at the same time join the boys in their mocking. I cannot pray that God bless my family and at the same time give a television –dominated as it today is by Satan in his battle against God and His church– a place in my family. I cannot pray that God heal the strife in my marriage, and at that same time not go out of my way to reach out to my spouse in total self-denial. We pray, and at the same time work. We realise: Jesus' instruction in the second petition teaches us a view on life itself, teaches us what's going on in life; life is war.

Answered?

Will a prayer focusing on the reality of this war be answered? Jesus' promise is this: "ask and you shall receive" (Luke 11:9). No, not that all we desire shall be granted. Jesus' point is rather that what is asked *according to the instructions of the Lord's Prayer* will surely be given to you. More, Christ Jesus has defeated Satan and his demons; though the devil still fights for all he's worth in an effort to dethrone the Lord God, he cannot succeed (see Revelation 12). In fact, though the Church may become small, and the number of the faithful on earth be but few, Satan shall not win control of God's world. It stands firm in Scripture: every knee shall bow before King Jesus, shall acknowledge that He is Lord and Christ (Philippians 2). Yes, already Satan is bound (Revelation 20). So we may pray confidently that God please make His kingdom come, and we may be convinced: God will hear our petition. Yes, He will give strength for us to be faithful and obedient – even in the face of Satan's attacks against us through the fellows at work. And yes, He will give strength for me to deny myself so that I do my part to heal my marriage – even when I feel Satan's attacks so strongly in my home. He will give strength even to cut sin out of my life.

Prayer for Obedience - 1

The disciples had observed Jesus praying. What they saw and heard prompted them to seek instruction from Jesus as to how they could speak with God in heaven. Jesus answered their request and taught them how to pray. His first instruction revolved around the matter of *Who* one spoke too; one speaks to *Father*. He next moved on to the mind-set that is to characterise prayer. In speaking with God one is not to be self-centred; one is instead to be God-centred – "hallowed be *Your* name." Further, the context of this life may not be forgotten as one speaks to God. Since life is war, the reality of that warfare is to feature in prayer – "Your kingdom come."

"Will"

The third petition Jesus instructed His disciples to pray is this: "Your will be done." The only word that could give us some problem in this petition is the word 'will'. The question then is this: does the word 'will' in the third petition refer to God's secret plan for our lives, contrived before the world began? Or does the word 'will' describe God's law, His commands for us?

With this petition we are not asking the Lord God that *God* please do what He thinks *He* should do; we're asking God rather that *we* do what He thinks *we* should do. The point of this petition is not that we ask God please to act according to His secret and sovereign plan; the point of this petition is rather that we ask God that *we* might be made to act according to His revealed commandments in the Bible. In the words of Lord's Day 49:

"Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Thy will."

We can "deny our own will" and do God's will only when the Lord God has told us what to do and

what not to do. God's secret plan for our lives is not our business; it's God's business. It is for us to involve ourselves with what God has revealed, and that's His law, His commands. With the third petition, Jesus told the twelve disciples around Him to focus on God's law for them; specifically, to ask God that their every action may be determined by God's will revealed in Holy Scripture. That's the third petition.

Practical

How did this petition touch the disciples in their circumstances? Were the disciples to understand Jesus' instruction to them in the third petition in this way that they were to ask God for strength that they might not steal, might not commit adultery, might not lie, etc? That is: were the disciples to understand Jesus' instruction here as a *general* prayer for *general* strength in the *broad* outlines of daily living?

To appreciate what Jesus taught in the third petition, we do well to understand that God's laws touched the disciples' lives in *every detail of their existence*. To draw out this point, we need to go for a short walk through the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus 11 contains God's instruction to His people about animals they could eat and animals they could not eat. By God's ordinance, the cow was clean and therefore edible, but a horse was unclean and therefore could not be eaten. Mutton was acceptable, but pork was not (cf vss 1-8). The same was true when it came to fish: any fish that had fins or scales could be eaten; if it missed either fins or scales it could not be eaten (vss 9-12). Similar rules are given regarding birds (vss 13-19), insects (vss 20-23) and reptiles (vss 41-45). Through all these stipulations, the Lord sought to impress on His people that they were different, holy, set apart from the nations (Lev 20:22ff).

The practical effect of this list of clean and unclean animals was that this chapter from the Word of God had to accompany the Israelites in all of life. There's food needed for tea, and so Mother sends the boys out fishing. The boys, however, could not bring home for tea whatever they caught; they first had to consider the will of the Lord, whether the Lord God wanted them to eat the fish they hooked. That is: the boys had to take Leviticus 11 with them to the sea, and ask themselves this question: what does the Lord want me to do with the fish on the line? So too when a guest arrived: Dad could not instruct his servant to kill yonder pig; it had to be that calf or that sheep. In other words: one first had to consider the will of the Lord; did God want us to roast this pig or that sheep? That was the faith God gave to His people by covenant; God's people had to ask *what God's will was in terms of what to put on the table*.

God's law reached into other areas of life. Leviticus 11:33 stipulates that any clay vessel in which was found a dead mouse or lizard or gecko had to be broken; it was unclean. We need to remember: in those days they did not have the closed-in houses that we've got, and didn't have rat poison to put in the attic either. In other words: rodents and lizards were not uncommon in the houses of Israel, and so a dead one in the pantry was quite possible too; this kind of thing happened so many times per year in each house. The Israelite had to consider the will of the Lord: what does God want us to do in this situation?

Leviticus 13 mentions leprosy, spots on the skin. We know from experience that spots on the skin do occur from time to time, be it in the form of a scab or ringworm or eczema, etc. The people of Israel immediately had to consider what the will of the Lord might be here: did the Lord want them to show this scab, or this swelling, or this bright spot on the skin to the priest (Lev 13:1ff)? So too when it came to pulling the winter clothes from the cupboard. Before the people could wear their winter coat, they had to check for spots, be it mould or something else (Lev 13:47ff). That is: God's law had a bearing on whether or not you could put on that favourite coat: what does God wish me to do?

Leviticus 14 speaks about "the leprous plague in a house" (vs 34). That is: if a mother in Israel, while doing her regular house cleaning, found a reddish or greenish spot on the wall (and let's face it, mould is a reality in showers and laundries even today – let alone then), this woman in Israel couldn't just

apply the equivalent of Shelleys Mould Killer, but she first had to consider the will of the Lord and possibly fetch the priest (14:33ff).

Chapter 15 speaks about bodily discharges, and how anything is unclean if one who has a discharge sits on it or lays on it. We all know that there's scarcely a household where there's no discharge some time during the month (cf vs 19). So: a particular bed, a particular chair in the house was unclean for a set period every month. That meant in turn that when the youth came home from school or from work, they could not just sit down on whatever chair they wished; Mom's chair could be unclean today. The point again is this: *even when it came to something so basic as choosing which chair to sit on, the people of Israel had first to consider the will of the Lord.* In all of life, down to the details of what goes on the table and what shall the children wear and where shall I sit, God's covenant children had to be busy in their minds with the question: *what does God want me to do?* Every area of life was claimed by the God who created heaven and earth; no inch of life in Israel was free from His oversight and authority.

Local Colour

Now the Lord Jesus tells His disciples what to pray. They're not sure about prayer, not sure what to say and how to 'get through' to God. Says Jesus in the third petition: ask God to enable you to do His will, to obey His law. Here Jesus builds on what God had instructed Israel in the OT. God's law did not pertain only to the big decisions of life, things like whether to kill somebody or whether to obey parents or what to do on the Sabbath. God's will stipulated for Israel what the people had to do in every area of life; always the people had to consider what God wanted them to do in their specific circumstances. This is Jesus' point: He instructs the twelve disciples, in their specific circumstances, to ask God for strength to do God's will each moment of the day. Specifically:

- Peter was a fisherman by trade, and so were James and John. As they hauled the nets out of the water tomorrow morning, they had to ask what God's will for them was at that moment – could they keep this fish, that fish, that one...? For God had said: some fish are unclean, and you may not eat them. So there was no dollar to be made by the disciples when they caught, say, a cobbler or a squid.
- For all we know, the disciples had their own homes, with their own collection of clay pots and pans. It can very well happen that they come home tonight to find a dead mouse in the pantry. In a circumstance as down-to-earth as that, the disciple had to ask the question: Lord, what do you want me to do?
- As a result of work, Nathanael (say) got a splinter in his finger, and it ended up in an infection. Could he just go to the doctor without any more? First he had to consider his God: Lord, what do you want me to do? Is this something for the priest to see?

The conclusion is this: around the clock, in all their circumstances –be it big or small– the people of Israel (and so Jesus' disciples too) had to be busy with the will of God: what does God want me to do now?

This is the thought that Jesus incorporates into His teaching about prayer. His disciples want to know how to pray. Says Jesus to them: "when you pray, say...: Your will be done." That is: "Grant, Father, that we...may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Your will, in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves." Seeking God's will, says Jesus, should be part of prayer; it gives so much to pray about, makes prayer part and parcel of all of life: Lord, what do you want me to do?

No Change Today

And we are to know: in the NT dispensation God's claim to every area of life is no less comprehensive than His claim was in the OT. Not only does His God-head dictate the point, not only does Christ's lordship over all the world dictate the point, not only does the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

dictate that God claims us all the time; it's also the specific revelation of Scripture. Says Paul to the Corinthians (and his words are built on the material of Leviticus!) – says Paul: "therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor 10:31). It's very New Testamentic: things so mundane, so down-to-earth as eating and drinking, are to be done to God's glory. And we understand: God is glorified through our activities only if we do God's will. What we eat, when we sit down to drink, when we choose our clothes for the day, the question is to be on our minds as much as it was in Israel: Lord, what do you want me to do? Should I eat this? Are You happy if I drink this? Do You wish me to wear this? In fact, Jesus specifically says that on the day of judgment we shall need to give account of every idle word we have spoken (Mt 12:36). You see: even the words I speak are subject to the notion of: Lord, what do You wish me to say?

It is the nuts and bolts of this life that I need to speak about with my Father in heaven.

Prayer for Obedience - 2

With the third petition – "Your will be done" – Jesus builds on God's Old Testament revelation that God's law touches all of life, with no exceptions, from foods to clothes to words to sport. So the third petition is to be on my lips always too: "Your will be done"; Lord, what do You want me to do in this situation, in that situation? It followed that I am to pray from out of my particular, specific circumstances, and here seek God's will. Prayer is not be general, vague, detached from concrete circumstances.

Example

Some time after Jesus gave His instruction to the disciples about prayer, He Himself prayed the third petition. It happened on the night before His crucifixion – Matthew 26. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane with eleven of His disciples (Judas Iscariot had already gone to the chief priests). In the Garden Jesus "began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed" (vs 37). In His distress Jesus prayed the following: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." That is: Jesus was very well aware that the cross was around the corner, very aware that even now Judas was on his way with the chief priests and the temple police to arrest Him. In His prayer, Jesus spoke of a cup; "let this cup pass from Me." The word 'cup' is used in the OT to describe the wrath of God (cf Ps 75:8). It's that wrath that Jesus was about to face, and He looked up against it terribly. So He told God exactly what His circumstances were and how He felt about His circumstances: "let this cup pass from Me." With words from the OT, Jesus told the Father about His actual situation and feelings. This is specific, this is concrete.

Notice too, though, what Jesus does after He's told the Father of His situation and His feelings. He prays the third petition: "Your will be done." It's an amazing prayer, really. Think about it: what would you do if you were standing in Jesus' shoes that night? You well know that the temple police are on their way, and you know too that a cross is waiting for you tomorrow. What would you do?? Every fibre in my body would cry out: "Run!" We'd run, we'd hide, we'd escape, anything to get away from the horrors of the cross. Yet that is not what Jesus does! Instead, He prays! He tells His God of His situation, tells Him of His anguish, and then seeks God's will for Him in the situation. Jesus knows the Scripture, knows that God's instruction for Him is death by means of the cross (see Mt 16:21; 20:17ff). The sacrifices of the law, God's revelation in a passage as Isaiah 53, etc., made abundantly clear to Jesus what God's will for Him was. So Jesus prays the third petition, and prays it not once but twice, yes, three times: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done" (vs 42).

Here is the instruction of Jesus to His disciples in the third petition, worked out concretely for the benefit of the disciples. I know: the three who were with Jesus were sound asleep when Jesus in His anguish sought to subject His will to God's holy will. But this material came to the disciples' attention – it got in the Bible somehow – and so became for them (and for us) penetrating instruction of what the third petition is all about. Jesus in His anguish understood that He lived not for Himself, understood in

His anguish that He was here for God, understood too that Satan would love to make Him follow His own desires. So Jesus made it His business to pray the third petition, made it His business to seek from God strength –in His particular and pressing circumstances– to deny the self and do what God wanted Him to do. He prayed, and so laid before us how He would have us to work with His instruction about prayer. He prayed, specifically, with self-denial, prayed for strength to do God’s will in His circumstances. And so we’re taught concretely how it is that we should pray.

Answered?

As we pray in this manner, as we seek God’s will for us in our specific circumstances, shall our prayers be answered? Know it, my dear reader, know it: Yes, your prayers shall be answered! I remind you again of the words of Jesus in Luke 11. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus taught them the Lord’s Prayer, and then Jesus added these words: "ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (vs 9). That’s comprehensive: whatever you ask will be given. But: it’s a promise given in the context of the instruction of the Lord’s Prayer. In other words: ask according to the instruction of the Lord’s Prayer, and it will be given. So: ask for what God’s will might be for you in your specific circumstances, and God will show you. Ask with the motif of the first petition in mind, that God’s name be hallowed. Ask with the motif of second petition in mind, that life is war and God must win. Ask with the motif of the third petition in mind, that you do His will in your situation. And God will answer! That’s the promise! Is He not Father for Jesus’ sake?! Does He not love you, care for you; is He not deeply interested in you?? Seek then His face in your specific circumstances, ask Him what it is that He wishes you to do, and you may be sure: He will show you His way. That’s the promise.

Challenge

That leaves a challenge for all who would pray the third petition. That challenge is this: you cannot pray the third petition and at the same time keep your Bibles closed. God’s will for us is revealed to us not by means of a voice in the ear or in the heart, it’s not revealed by means of intuition or gut-feelings. God’s will for us today is revealed in His Word. As Paul put it:

"All Scripture is...profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16f).

And David:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

As we pray for understanding and strength to do God’s will in our circumstances, we shall need to make it our business to be thoroughly familiar with the Word God gave.

Prayer – Confession of Dependence - 1

What ought strong, healthy, competent men to say to God? The disciples around Jesus weren’t so sure. Hence their request: "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus’ answer included more than instruction about Who the God was to whom one prayed. It also included more than instruction to pray that God’s name be hallowed, that His kingdom be made to come, that His will be done. Jesus told the twelve disciples standing around Him to pray also for *daily bread*.

Amazing

Each of the twelve standing around Jesus were mature, healthy men, all quite able to look after himself. There was a Levi, also known as Matthew; he was a tax collector by trade, a hard-dealing

business man well able to extract from another what the other owed in taxes. Even if we assume he was an honest man in his tax-collecting, we still need to perceive the man as shrewd and self-sufficient. Among the disciples were also a number of fishermen, rough, tough characters who didn't mind the storms at sea, who didn't mind either getting their hands dirty with fish scales and insides. Of Peter and Andrew we read that they had their own boat, and of James and John we read that they worked with their father Zebedee in the family business. There's no doubt: these men were tradesmen, they knew the craft of fishing. In a word: they were *men*, self-sufficient, able to look after themselves, able to stand on their own two feet in the world.

These *men* asked Jesus to teach them to pray; they wanted some guidance in how to speak with God in heaven. Jesus (we may imagine) looked the twelve in the eye, and told them all –no matter how big and strong they felt– to ask for "daily bread". Said Jesus to the twelve: you want to know what to say to God in heaven? Speak with Him, said Jesus, about tomorrow morning's breakfast. More: *ask* God to give you breakfast tomorrow morning.

We understand: this is a rather amazing instruction. The twelve want to know how to pray. Jesus' answer seems to forget totally that these are mature *men*, each quite able to look after the self. Need *they* ask for daily bread?! It strikes us as humiliating. Surely, independent, self-sufficient men should be quite able, thank you, to look after themselves!

Dependent

It is basic to prayer to know oneself *dependent* on the Lord God. Foundational to prayer, foundational to any relation with God, is the notion that God is **God** and we but creatures, the notion that we cannot live without His giving to us life and breath itself, cannot live without His giving to us food and drink, clothes and shelter, yes, all the things we need for body and soul. The person who wishes to be independent and self-sufficient will invariably have trouble praying because he has the wrong attitude toward God, and the wrong attitude concerning himself also. The disciples asked for guidance in praying. Jesus impressed upon them: to pray you need to know and acknowledge your *dependence*. You may be big men, strong men, healthy men, experts in your trade, but –says Jesus– you are and remain dependent on the Lord God for tomorrow's breakfast. Says Jesus: unless God in heaven give you your daily ration, you will hunger tomorrow, you'll have nothing to eat.

Revealed in Scripture

By so saying, Jesus very much built on God's revelation to His people in the Old Testament. In Genesis 2 we read the following:

"Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat'" (Gen 2:15f).

From the beginning God made it clear to Adam (and so to all his descendents over the centuries) that Adam was not self-sufficient, not dependent on his own resources. It was God who placed him in the garden, and straightaway gave him his evening meal; Adam could help himself to any tree of the garden God graciously gave.

The people of Israel in the desert were taught the same lesson. Morning after morning breakfast was laying on the ground for the people; they needed but step outside their tents, gather into a bucket what they needed, cook it up and sit down to eat (Ex 16). For forty long years the Lord impressed upon the people their dependence on Him; each morning He showed His own that they were not self-reliant, were not to trust their own ingenuity in supplying daily bread for the family. So it was that the psalmist could confess this:

"These all wait for You,
That You may give them their food in due season.

What You give them they gather in;
You open Your hand, they are filled with good" (Ps 104:27ff).

And again:

"Who gives food to all flesh,
For His mercy endures forever" (Ps 136:25).

And once more:

"The eyes of all look expectantly to You,
And You give them their food in due season.
You open Your hand
And satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps 145:15f).

There is no doubt about the instruction of the OT: all creatures, including that crown of God's creation known as Mankind, are dependent on their Creator. One may feel so big and strong, may be publicly considered a very gifted man in his field of expertise, but the teaching of Scripture is clear: all are thoroughly dependent on the Lord God for "life, breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25).

Real Life Example

In fact, this dependence had been concretely driving home to the fishermen amongst the disciples by events they'd experienced a number of weeks before they requested Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11). Some of the disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing – how frustrating for tradesmen. But Jesus told them to cast the nets anyway..., and see: "they caught a great number of fish," so many that "their net was breaking" (Luke 5:6). Talk about dependent! So those tough fishermen standing before Jesus as He spoke about prayer should get on their knees and ask God for tomorrow's breakfast. Though so strong and so able, they should not think in terms of being self-sufficient; though so strong and able they ought to know themselves to be but people, dependent, humble.

But a man

That is the attitude, my dear reader, that makes prayer possible. Without a sense of dependence on the Lord, you cannot pour out your heart before God and implore Him for His blessings in your circumstances. In order to pray, you need to acknowledge not that you're a *man*, a somebody; to pray you need to acknowledge that you are **but a man**, a creature *dependent* on your Creator and Redeemer.

Here, then, the whole notion of our *creatureness* needs to be clearly in our focus and so does the whole notion of our *sinfulness*. The measure of being a man is not that one is independent; that's arrogance, pride. The measure of being a man is that one acknowledges his place under the Creator, acknowledges also that this Creator –though rejected by us in Paradise– has again become our Father through Jesus Christ, and it is He and He alone who supplies for all our daily needs. Dependence! In the words of the Catechism:

Grant "*that we may acknowledge that Thou art the only fountain of all good, and that our care and labour, and also Thy gifts, cannot do us any good without Thy blessing. Grant, therefore, that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures (ourselves included!), and place it only in Thee*" (Lord's Day 50).

Conclusion

Those big and strong tradesmen standing before Jesus are to pray for daily bread. We understand that this instruction pertained not just to the crust one may have for lunch. Implicit in Jesus' instruction to

the disciples to pray for daily *bread* is also instruction to pray for the cheese you put on the bread, and the drink you consume with the bread; yes, it's instruction to pray for food in general, to pray for drink and clothes and shelter and sleep and daily work and strength to do the work, etc. Here is instruction to ask God for "all our bodily needs".

Prayer – Confession of Dependence - 2

The twelve strong, independent men gathered around Jesus were unsure what to say to God in heaven. Jesus' teaching included instruction to ask God for daily bread. The twelve were to go through life with an attitude of dependence on God emblazoned on their minds. So they should ask the Lord God for life, breath, everything.

Should the twelve, however, ask God for any item that struck their fancy? Should they ask for steak for their daily tea? Should the fishermen in their midst ask for a new boat because, well, the neighbour has one too?

Structure

To answer the question, we need to appreciate the structure of the Lord's Prayer. We tend to see the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer as made up of two parts. The first three each speak of 'your' – "Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done" – and the last three each speak of 'us' – "Give us day by day our daily bread, Forgive us our debts, Lead us not into temptation". This observation prompts us to conclude –mistakenly!– that God is central to the first three petitions, while in last three we get to pray for ourselves.

God	Us
Hallowed be <i>Your</i> Name	Give <i>us</i> day by day our daily bread
<i>Your</i> kingdom come	Forgive <i>us</i> our debts
<i>Your</i> will be done	Lead <i>us</i> not into temptation

It is certainly true that with the first three petitions we pray with God central to our minds and prayers. But it is not true that with the second set of three petitions we now get a chance to focus on *our* needs and wants without regard anymore to God. Once we get to the second set of three petitions, we are not to consider our God-centredness finished (as in: 'we've asked enough for God; now it's our turn'); with the second set of three petitions *God* remains the centre, the focus of our praying. The theme of that first petition – "Hallowed be Your name" – sets the tone for *all* prayer, including when we pray the fourth petition, when we ask for daily bread. Even a prayer for daily bread is to be *God-centred*.

To appreciate how this petition is meant to be God-centred, we need to understand the connections between the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer. The first petition sets the tone for all prayer: "hallowed be Your name" – God-centred. The second petition set the context in which we pray: "Your kingdom come" – life is war. In that context of war, now, we glorify God's name by doing the will of God, obeying His laws. Hence the third petition: "Your will be done." These three belong together.

But: how can one do the will of God? We all understand: we are not able to do the will of God if the

God upon whom we are dependent does not supply us with daily needs. No soldier in battle can carry out the commands of his general successfully if that soldier's stomach remains empty and his store of ammunition depleted. To carry out his general's wishes, that soldier needs his 'daily bread'.

The Lord God would have His people, redeemed as they are in the blood of Christ, to glorify Him. They do so in a context of war, of satanic hatred. To be able to glorify God in the context of battle, temptation, hatred, strife, God's people are to obey His commands. To live obediently for God, God's people *need strength* from God, need daily bread and drink, need sleep, clothes, a vehicle, etc. The point is this: the fourth petition interlocks neatly with the first three; this fourth petition concerning daily bread also has *God* as its focus.

This connection between daily bread and God's glory is nothing new. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke of such basics of human existence as food, drink and clothes. But, Jesus taught His disciples in that sermon, do not worry about these basics. That is: don't focus your attention on them. What then? If the disciples were not to burn up their energies and their efforts in pursuit of their own needs, what was to burn them up? Jesus' answer was this:

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Here is the same thought as I'm here developing: we are to be *God-centred* in all our activities, thoughts, and prayers, *and God Himself will supply whatever we need.*

God-centred

Our petitions for all our bodily needs, then, are to be focused on God's glory. If the apostle Paul can say that our eating and our drinking, yes, all of our activities, are to be done to the glory of God (I Cor 10:31), then it's evident that also our *asking* for food and drink is to be done to the glory of God. Just as I am not here for myself but instead for God, so too I am not to ask for myself but for God's glory. My petitions for daily bread are then to be prayed with God's glory central to my mind.

Satisfied with the Needful

This focus in the fourth petition determines what we pray for. I need food for tomorrow because my cupboard is empty, and so I pray for food. But I don't go and pray for a steak! I don't pray for a steak (much as my mouth may drool at the thought!) because I don't need a *steak* in order to do God's will in my daily life, don't need a steak to resist the evil one and make God's kingdom come, don't need a steak to glorify God's name. I receive a job that requires a vehicle to get to it. So I pray for a car in order to be able to carry out the task God gives me in His kingdom. But I don't pray for a Porche, because I don't need a Porche in order to get to work; a Holden will do.

Again, if I'm not to pray for the big and the elaborate (unless, of course, to do my particular task in God's kingdom I need the big and the elaborate), it follows that my efforts and energies are not to be bent on obtaining the big and the elaborate either. If prayer is to be directed to God's glory, daily life is to be lived to God's glory. It's not without significance that Jesus told His disciples to pray for 'bread', not for caviar. In their daily lives they were to be content with bread, though their appetites might cry out for the more fancy. Here is the same thought for us as we met with the first petition: our goals in life are to be God-centred, not self-centred. What we work for is God's glory, not our own comforts and empires. Where it's our own empires and comforts we pursue, we ought not to be surprised that prayer is difficult and frustrating.

Answered?

"Give us day by day our daily bread," Jesus said to the disciples around Him in response to their request for instruction about praying. The disciples now knew what to pray for: the plain, common

things needed to live this life to the greater glory of God – things like food, faithfulness, shelter, sleep, humility, new shoes, catching the train on time, obedience, etc. Whatever is needed to carry out God's commands in my daily circumstances so that in turn I make God's kingdom come and give glory to His wonderful name: that's what I pray for.

Would God hear a request from the disciples for daily bread? Jesus gave the twelve this promise: "ask, and it shall be given to you" (Luke 11:13). Jesus is insistent: yes, you will receive! Shall I invariably receive, then, the new shoes I want to have because, well, because everybody else has them? No, I shall not. Shall I get the footwear I need in order to carry out God's commands for me in the concrete circumstances of my battle against sin and Satan as I seek God's glory? Make no mistake: *that's the promise!* In His way –maybe differently than I expect– God will surely supply. That's the promise.

Paul puts the thought in a powerful rhetorical question like this:

"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Yes, it's the promise: all things in the world are here for us! And we are here for God. If we wish to pray, we shall need to deny the self and live for God. Then ask for the daily bits and pieces we need to live for Him, and we shall certainly receive whatever is needed for God's greater glory.

Prayer – Forgiveness for Daily Bread - 1

The disciples once witnessed Jesus praying. When He was finished, one of the twelve asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). In answer to that question, the Lord told His disciples –by means of what we call the Lord's Prayer– that the focus of all prayer to God was to be that His Name be hallowed the more. That hallowing of God's wonderful name occurs in a context of war; in God's kingdom are many rebels, persons who don't acknowledge His kingship. He taught also that God's kingdom is made to come and His name is given the glory when sinners obey God's commands. Hence the third petition: 'Your will be done.' And in order that the disciples have the where-with-all to do the will of God (that in turn His kingdom is made to come and His name glorified), they needed to ask God to "give us day by day our daily bread."

This request for bodily needs was not the last petition Jesus taught His disciples. It *could* not be the end of Jesus' instruction about prayer because the disciples invariably *misused* the good gifts God gave in answer to the fourth petition.

Gifts Misused

Jesus gave His instruction about prayer on a particular day. The twelve disciples –and they were all gathered around Jesus listening to His instruction– had all received so many bits and pieces earlier in the day already. They'd received from God's hand the gift of sleep, the health to get out of bed that morning, clothes to put on, breakfast to eat, strength to do their chores, etc. It had all come from God's hand, and had been given so that Andrew and Nathaniel and Matthew and Thomas and the rest of the disciples might obey God's commands for them in their circumstances – so that in turn God's kingdom was made to come and His name be glorified.

But: what had the disciples done with the many good gifts God had given that day? The Bible is so clear on the point: the disciples invariably had not used God's good gifts only for the praise of God's glorious name. The Scriptures of the Old Testament speak of every person being evil, of none being righteous, of none seeking after God, of all having turned aside to do their own thing (Ps 14:1ff; cf Rom 3:10ff). Indeed, even our best works are defiled with sin (Is 64:6). In the words of Lord's Day 51: men are "wretched sinners". This was material the disciples could know from their Bibles; God taught them that they had invariably misused all the "bodily needs" God had given them that morning already.

Divine Reaction

The disciples could know also that God *hated* this misuse of His gifts. They were familiar with passages of Scripture as Deuteronomy 32. The passage relates the fact that God supplied Israel's bodily needs most abundantly; God gave

"curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock,
With fat of lambs;
And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats,
With the choicest of wheat..." (vss 13f).

But –the passage continues– Israel did not use God's gift of abundant daily bread in order to do His will in their circumstances, did not use it to make His kingdom come, glorify His name. Rather –vs 15– "Jeshurun" (and that's a name for Israel; see 33:5,26; Is 44:2) "grew fat and kicked", bucked against the Lord who gave so much. What is God's response to this misuse of His abundant gifts? Vs 19:

"when the Lord saw it, He spurned them...,
And He said: 'I will hide My face from them.'"

See there God's reaction to His people's misuse of His gracious gifts.

On the particular day when Jesus spoke to His disciples about prayer, they had received so much already from the Lord. The disciples knew from Scripture too that they had not used it all to God's glory. More, they knew from Scripture what God's reaction was to their misuse of His gifts. Given that they knew this, how could they seek God's face in prayer?! Given that they had misused so much of God's gracious gifts to them, how could they ever ask God again for daily bread – even if they ask it so that they might have the where-with-all to do God's will, to make His kingdom come, to hallow His name? They *dare* not seek His face any more with such a petition, simply because they'd misused the gifts God had already given today. Then ask for more daily bread tomorrow?! That's not on! *It's exactly our dogged misuse of God's gifts that makes praying so difficult!*

Pray Anyway!

In this setting, Jesus' instruction about prayer is surprising, encouraging! It is as if Jesus tells His disciples, 'I know that God has given you much this morning already, and I know also that you have not used all God's gifts simply and only for the glory of the Giver. But, My disciples, that does not mean that you should despair, that you should quit praying. Rather, the fact that you have misused Father's gracious gifts to you today –be it the gift of energy, of food, of health, of speech, of intellect, etc– should prompt you to pray for *forgiveness*.' Says Jesus to His disciples: 'it is true that you have chalked up a debt with God through your misuse of the bodily needs God gave to you this morning. But,' Jesus adds, 'don't let the existence of the debt stop you from praying. Rather, mention the reality of the debt to Him. Tell Him in so many words that you have a debt with God. Tell Him that you've misused His gifts, tell Him that you have not used His gifts to obey His will alone, tell Him that you've used the tongue He gave you to speak evil of another, tell Him that you've used the energy and the intellect He gave you in order to build up your own ego and reputation. Remind Him of that debt – go ahead.'

Jesus goes further than instructing the disciples to remind God of the debt. Jesus tells His disciples not just to *confess* the reality of having a debt; He tells them also to ask God please to *forgive* that debt!

Forgive

What might the notion of 'forgive' mean? The request that God please 'forgive' is not a plea that God please *ignore* the debt we've accumulated with Him through our misuse of His gifts. Nor is it a plea

that God simply *write off* that debt. Both those concepts –to ignore and to write off– imply that the debt leave its traces on God’s books, is still ‘discoverable’ so that it can one day be dragged up again and possibly be held against us. The concept ‘forgiveness’ has a far richer content. ‘Forgiveness’ captures the notion that sins are gone, *irretrievably gone*. I think of the words of David in Ps 103:

"As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vs 12).

Our day of rapid transportation draws east pretty close to west; one need but travel for a day to reach the far side of the globe. In David’s day, though, east was impossibly far from west; what was lost in the west was irretrievable for the man of the east. If sins are removed as far as east from west extends, those sins are gone, *irretrievably gone*.

The prophet Micah speaks of sins being "pardoned", "passed over", and then describes these sins as being "cast...into the depths of the sea" (7:18f). Again, with today’s technology one can retrieve what is cast into the depths of the sea. It was not possible, however, in the days of Micah. And that’s the point: sins are removed, *irretrievably* removed so that they cannot be dragged up again. Consider the gravy left over on your dinner plate. Once that plate is washed, the gravy washed away, you cannot retrieve it, cannot reconstruct the mess on the plate. It’s washed away, gone, irretrievably gone. That’s the notion of ‘forgiveness’. And that, says Jesus to His disciples, is what they are to ask God to do with the debt they’ve piled up with Him through their misuse of the breakfast, the energy, the money, the time, the talents, the ‘bodily needs’ God gave them that day.

Prayer – Forgiveness for Daily Bread - 2

Though the Lord gave the disciples so many blessings day by day, they invariably misused God’s good gifts. This misuse implied that they built up a debt with God of such magnitude that they had no right to appeal to God again for daily bread. With such a debt, prayer is effectively impossible.

Jesus’ instruction to the twelve, though, was that they should mention the debt to God very honestly. More, they should ask God in heaven to forgive this debt. With this instruction, Jesus taught His disciples to ask God to take that debt away so that it was irretrievably gone – like the gravy stain washed off the dinner plate.

Ground for Forgiveness

Why could Jesus give a petition as this? Here is the gospel of free grace, as God had proclaimed it in the Old Testament. All those sacrifices of the old dispensation –and among those numerous sacrifices were offerings that had to be made day by day– heralded to the people of Israel (including the disciples standing around Jesus!) that forgiveness of sins was God’s free gift to His unworthy people. Whereas the Israelite ought to die on account of his sins, whereas the sinner ought to remain eternally in God’s debt and so spend an eternity in hell, God was pleased to wipe sins away so that the sinner might go free, totally and eternally free; the animal died in his place.

The sacrifices of the temple foreshadowed the coming sacrifice of the Perfect Man on the cross. In the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"...He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed" (53:5).

This was the teaching of the Old Testament, upon which Jesus built His instruction to the disciples to pray for forgiveness of the debt they daily accumulated with God. It was a teaching He was Himself to fulfil on the cross of Calvary. Jesus would die in place of the sinner, so that they sinner might go free.

Example: David

So there was a David who received from the Lord's gracious hand his daily bread, be it health and a home, be it marriage and children, be it food and drink, even the throne of the land. But David did not appreciate God's good gifts, did not use them to do God's will in his circumstances (and so glorify God's name); David instead used his health and his home, his humour and his figure to entice Bethsheba into his bed – sin. God gave to this king in Israel the power and mind to rule over His people, but David did not use God's gifts to do God's will in His circumstances; he instead used his power and his army to kill innocent Uriah.

This is the man, though, who spoke so gloriously of sins being *forgiven*. This is the man who could say in Ps 32:

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity" (vss 1f).

This, David knew, is the God of Scripture: He freely *forgives* those who confess their debt before Him – though that debt be so enormously huge. It's a forgiveness granted to the sinner not because the sinner has earned it; on the contrary, the fact that the sinner has a debt implies that the sinner has not earned forgiveness. It's a forgiveness granted out of free grace, granted because the Jesus who taught His disciples to pray would Himself go to the cross of Calvary to pay the debts accumulated by His people through their sins, go to the cross to wash those sins away.

Example: Peter

Peter stood with the twelve as Jesus instructed His disciples about prayer. Not so very long afterward he denied vehemently that he so much as knew who Jesus was (Luke 22:54ff). Here was sin, here was a debt with God that Peter could not begin to pay off. But on the day of Pentecost, this very same Peter could speak of forgiveness of sins to the crowds who were dismayed at the thought that they had killed God's greatest gift to them; said Peter:

"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38).

Amazing, but this is the gospel: even a debt as massive as is implied when one killed the Son of God Himself can be forgiven! The point is: repent, tell the Lord of your evil, confess it, come clean of it, and that sin is washed away, forgiven for Jesus' sake! That's what Peter can say, because he knows his own debts with God forgiven. That's what Peter can say, because he knows God forgives the sins of all who believe in Jesus Christ. Yes, it's a promise valid for everyone whom God calls to Himself (vs 39): God for Jesus' sake forgives, freely forgives the massive debts we build up with Him! No sin is too awful for forgiveness; no debt is too big to be taken away.

Result

The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes the effects of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Since there is forgiveness for sins through the blood of Christ, God's people are boldly to enter the presence of God Himself by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19). Jesus' payment for sin on the cross has torn apart the curtain that prevented access to God, so that God's people may freely speak their minds to holy God Himself. "Let us draw near", says the apostle, "with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (10:22).

That is: with Jesus' instruction in the fifth petition He told the twelve what to pray to *make prayer as a whole possible!* In the face of all their misuse of God's gifts, in the face of all the selfishness that characterised their lives, in the face of all the disobedience to God's will that abounded in their lives

day by day, they could not speak with God *unless there was forgiveness of sins*. And forgiveness was what God promised in the Old Testament, yes, forgiveness was what Jesus obtained on the cross, and so access is readily available again to God. So the disciples should pray the fifth petition, daily. And we are to pray that same petition also, daily. Though our misuse of God's bountiful gifts lead us to conclude that we dare not appear in God's holy presence again –He cannot but be terribly angry with us– Jesus tells us here to meet the obstacle to prayer head on, to confess sin, to ask for free remission of that debt – for Jesus' sake. In the words of the Catechism: "for the sake of Christ's blood, do not impute to us, wretched sinners, any of our transgressions, nor the evil which still clings to us" (Lord's Day 51). *Then prayer as a whole is possible again.*

Prayer – Forgiveness for Daily Bread - 3

The disciples sought instruction from Jesus about prayer. He told them to ask God to forgive the debt they daily accumulated with God through their misuse of His blessings. Forgiveness was possible because the Lord Jesus Christ would die to pay for sin, as prophesied in the Old Testament. Because of His forgiving work, God's people again "have access to the divine majesty", and should boldly seek God's face in prayer.

Results

What, now, might the results be of such a prayer for forgiveness? I mention three.

- ***Forgiveness is Certain***

In the first place, we may fully expect that our sins definitely will be forgiven. I say this because of Jesus' words to the disciples when He taught them to pray. After He gave them the Lord's Prayer, He told them the following; said Jesus:

"...ask, and it will be given to you" (Luke 11:9).

And again:

"For everyone who asks receives" (Luke 11:10).

Says Jesus to the disciples standing around Him (and this word is true for all God's people of every time and place): 'ask according to the instruction of the Lord's Prayer, and God in heaven will definitely supply. He will, because He has promised – witness the OT sacrifices, witness My coming death on the cross. He will wash away sin, He will forgive your misuse of the daily bread He gives – no matter how horrendous your sins are. So: don't shy away from praying, don't think that God will be angry with you forever, don't let your guilty conscience prevent you from going on your knees. Rather, confess sins and then dare to work with God's promise of forgiveness, dare to ask for forgiveness. He has promised forgiveness; work with that promise, ask Him to forgive the enormous debt you've built up with Him. And be convinced: God in heaven will answer, will forgive, will wash away every last bit of the debt you daily build with your God.' That's the first result.

- ***Daily Bread Assured***

The second result is this: if God in fact does forgive my sins so that I have no debt with God at all, I may again ask for daily bread, yes, and expect to receive what I need also. Deuteronomy 32 told us of how God would discard Israel because of their hardened misuse of His gifts, of the daily bread He gave. But once that debt with God is gone, once there is forgiveness, God returns again in favour to His people and supplies again their daily needs. Ps 85 speaks of God having "forgiven the iniquity of Your people; You have covered all their sin" (vs 2). That is: here is answer to the fifth petition. But the same psalm mentions the result of this forgiveness as it relates to the fourth petition. I read this:

"Yes, the Lord will give what is good;
And our land will yield its increase" (vs 12).

Though sin, misuse of God's gifts, should lead to God's hand being forever closed to sinners; though misuse of the gifts God has given in answer to the fourth petition should lead to God denying every other request according to the fourth petition, God in infinite mercy is pleased to forgive sin (the fifth petition) – and so answer the fourth petition again too! That's the promise of Holy Scripture: we may pray confidently for daily bread because all our sins of misuse of God's gifts are forgiven for Jesus' sake! So, dear reader: pray, pray for all you need day by day to live for God's glory, all you need to make His kingdom come, all you need to do God's will. Pray for your needs, even while you know you've misused God's ample gifts this morning already. Pray for your needs, confident that your Father in Jesus Christ graciously forgives your sins. Pray, and seek grace too to use God's many gifts to His greater glory – and not your own satisfaction.

- ***I Forgive the Other***

The third result of such a gospel is this: I readily forgive those who trespass against me. Jesus put it like this:

"...if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:14f).

In simple terms: to hold a grudge against the neighbour on account of his wrongs against me means there is no forgiveness for me in the courts of God. And we know: if there is no forgiveness for us from God, there is no blessing from God either; there is only the curse. Then we can pray for bodily needs till the cows come home, but there is no answer.... And prayer is so hard, so frustrating.... I want, then, to be able to pray? I shall need readily to forgive my neighbour whatever evil or hurt he has done to me.

The disciples wanted to know how to pray. Jesus in infinite mercy taught them not just four petitions; He added a fifth – the one that makes approaching God possible in the first place. Given that instruction, it is for us to go on our knees before the Majesty on high, confess our sins and seek forgiveness of our debts with God. And our Father in Jesus Christ will hear, and graciously supply all we daily need to live to His greater glory.

That is the promise.

Prayer – No Temptation! - 1

Twelve hefty, mature men stood around Jesus, listening in on His conversations with His Father in heaven. When He finished His prayer, one of the twelve asked of Jesus the question on the minds of them all: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples." Jesus obliged their question, and taught them to pray. "When you pray," said Jesus to the twelve, "say: ...And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one." This petition is necessary both because of Satan's craftiness as well as human weakness.

Satan: crafty

The word "temptation" refers to an enticement, an allurements to do something wrong. In plain language: a temptation is a bait set before us luring us to a certain action. It is Satan who sets temptation before us, seeks to entice God's own to sin against God. When Satan was cast out of heaven (after Christ's victory on the cross), the following warning was issued:

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Rev 12:12).

This intense wrath of the devil against the Christ who defeated him prompts the devil to declare war on those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (vs 17). That is life; life is war.

The element we need to bear in mind with the sixth petition is this: how does Satan fight that war? What's his strategy, his technique? There is a passage in Scripture that warns us against the devil because, says the passage, "your adversary the devil walks around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet 5:8). That passage places in our minds the thought that Satan is readily noticeable; a roaring lion is not a secret, by his roar he's announced his presence and his intent. Yet we do wrong to think of Satan's strategy being one of much noise and announcement of his attacks. The Bible portrays Satan in much different terms, portrays him as wily, crafty, devious, unassuming – and at the same time deadly.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul speaks of "the wiles of the devil" (6:11). The word 'wiles' refers to scheming, to cunning efforts to bait God's people to sin. The same apostle writes to the Corinthians that "Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light" (II Cor 11:14). He masquerades, disguises himself so that his true nature is hidden. We understand: this craftiness on the part of the devil makes him far more of an enemy for us than would be the case if he would announce his every arrival with the roar of a lion. The whole notion of temptation, of enticing, of luring hinges on the concept of deceit. Ask any fisherman what bait tempts the fish the best.... You don't catch a thing if you loudly announce that 'I'm going to fry you.'

Examples

In his craftiness, the devil sets temptations before us in such a way that we don't recognise them to be temptations. Eve walked in the garden one day, as she had done so often in days gone by. In the harmony and peace that was Paradise, she could stop to admire this animal, scratch that one between the ears, stroke another – including bears, tigers, and dugites. In a setting so normal and common place as possible, Satan came with his temptation: "Has God really said...?" He didn't announce: 'here I am with all my cunning and my deceit, and I'm going to try to bait you.' He didn't come with bells and whistles and lots of fanfare so that Eve might be on her guard. He came as the deceiver he was, with cunning, craftiness, deceit. When Eve suspected nothing, when all was quite normal, there came the devil....

That same patterns presents itself in the devil's attack on Peter. True: Jesus warned Peter of Satan's intent. Said Jesus to Peter: "Satan has asked for you, that he might sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). But when the attack came, Peter was not at all prepared, not at all suspecting the devil's temptation. Peter sat around the fire in the courtyard of the high priest's house, chatting no doubt with the soldiers and others looking for the warmth of the fire. A very normal, common place setting. A girl walked up, looked at Peter, and commented to the crowd: "This man was also with Him." How normal, how common place, nothing out of the ordinary. Yet this was a temptation, a bait prepared in hell to make Peter deny any involvement with the Lord Jesus. In Jesus' own words: here Satan was sifting Peter. Obvious? An attack played out in the open, with adequate warnings and preparations? Not from the devil's side! Let it be a warning as to how Satan operates!

Jesus knew the nature and method of the enemy. That's why He told His disciples, when they asked for instruction about prayer, to pray also the sixth petition. Satan's method of attack is sinister, is devious, it's not straight-forward and open. This is a reality Jesus took into account, and so He taught those twelve mature men standing around Him to pray, to pray not just for daily bread or for forgiveness of sins, but to pray also that God would please lead them not into temptation but instead deliver them from the Evil One.

Weakness

The second element that makes this sixth petition necessary is our inability to withstand Satan's bait. It's not just Satan's craftiness, his low-profile approach, his deceit that makes his bait so tempting. We

haven't the where-with-all either to withstand his temptations.

Satan entered a Garden of no sin, spoke to a woman whose every fibre was free of evil. Yes, Eve was able to sin, but she was also able not to sin. She had been created in the image of God, was adorned in her mind with true and wholesome knowledge of her Creator and of all things spiritual, her heart and will were upright, all her affections pure, completely holy (Canons of Dort, III/IV, Art 1). To this sinless person Satan came with his temptation, came in true devilish fashion; he enticed her without warning, enticed her when her guard was down. She fell for his bait, considered that indeed the forbidden fruit was desirable (Gen 3:6), and ate.

If, dear readers, sinless Eve –and sinless Adam too– fell for Satan's temptation, how much less shall the disciples standing around Jesus be able to withstand Satan's crafty attacks! Ps 14 reminds us that "all" people have "become corrupt" so that there is "none who does good, No, not one" (vs 3). It is then arrogance most profound for the disciples to assume that somehow they can withstand Satan's enticements! By telling His disciples that they were to add to the five petitions of their prayers also a sixth was instruction to the twelve about their depravity, about their weaknesses, about their inability to withstand the devil. Then Yes, it's true that Peter had big words to say to Jesus when Jesus revealed to him Satan's request to sift Peter. Said the apostle: "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). Sifted? Tempted? Attacked? Peter wasn't worried about it; he was sure he could handle that quite all right; he was man enough for the devil. And Jesus let Peter find out for himself: "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me" (vs 34). We know what happened. How necessary, how absolutely necessary it was for Peter to pray that sixth petition, be it in the Garden of Gethsemane, be it always!

And equally: it is imperative that *we* pray that sixth petition. We too display the height of arrogance if we suggest that we can withstand Satan's attacks. The apostle Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to write this:

"...what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.... I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Rom 7:15ff).

In the words of our LD: "In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment." Here is the doctrine of depravity, of abiding sinfulness even for those regenerated by the Spirit of God. As Psalm 103 says it (rhymed):

"He knows our frame, that it is weak and humble;
He keeps in mind how prone we are to stumble.
The Lord recalls that we are only dust" (vs 5).

No, there is no room for pride or for self-reliance; here is room only for humility, deep humility. In the face of Satan's attacks, we haven't got a chance. We are *dependent*, totally dependent, on God's help, God's grace, God's strength to withstand whatever bait, whatever enticement, whatever temptation the Evil One lays on our path.

Distinctly, then, there is need, absolute need for us to heed Jesus' instruction to pray that sixth petition! Jesus Himself knew about the realities of Satan's anger, hatred, deceit, craftiness. He took it for real, and so instructed His disciples –mature men as they were– to pray this prayer of dependence. He took it for real, and so we too need to take Satan for real – and pray accordingly.

Prayer – No Temptation! - 2

The disciples sought instruction about how to pray. Jesus told them to take Satan seriously, to take also their own weaknesses seriously, and so beseech the Lord to lead them not into temptation.

Will such a prayer be answered? The world in which the Lord God gives us a place is filled with devils, yes, all around us are temptations of so many colours and sizes and shapes. We're told that riches makes one happy, and so does a pretty woman – and we're inclined to agree. We're told to take control of our own destinies, and the thought is so attractive to us. We're told that the cause of problems in our lives is not ourselves; it's instead the circumstances, it's our genetic makeup, its our background, it's the government, anything to pass the blame to another and free the self of responsibility – and we're much attracted to the idea. It's so tempting, so very *tempting* to follow the current, to accept the thought that I'm not the problem of my life. In the midst of so many temptations, does the Lord hear our prayer to lead us not into temptation, to deliver us instead from the evil one?

Encouragement

Jesus' promise to His disciples when He taught them to pray was this: "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Luke 11:9). That is: ask *according to the instruction of the Lord's Prayer*, and you will receive all you need. That is a promise of God to which we may appeal in our circumstances: ask that our Father in Jesus Christ deliver us from the evil one, ask it in the awareness of our own weaknesses and our own inner inclination to sin, ask it in the awareness that sin blocks God's gift of daily bread (so that in turn you cannot do God's will, make His kingdom come, and so give to God the glory that His due), and God will surely answer our petition! Jesus meant exactly what He said: "Ask, and it will be given to you."

We need to recall also that behind the promise of this petition is the victory of Jesus Christ over Satan on the cross. It is true that Scripture speaks of a woe upon the earth because of Satan's wrath. And it's equally true that the Scripture speaks of the "wiles of the devil", of his deceit and cunning and trickery. But the Scriptures speak also of Jesus' victory over Satan. On the cross of Calvary the Son of God not only paid for sin and satisfied the wrath of God; on the cross of Calvary the Son of God also battled the devil, and overcame him. The result is that satan is "bound" (Rev 20:2). He is not free, is not at liberty to do whatever he pleases. Rather, Christ has been given a throne over the universe so that He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20). Altogether, this simply means that we can ask the Lord God to lead us not into temptation, can ask the Lord to deliver us from the evil one. And He both *hears* and *answers*.

Example

How, concretely, shall we then pray? All life, and so all prayer, is to be God-centred. As we live this life, we speak with our Father in heaven, speak in terms of praising Him. We ask for strength to obey His commands to us, ask for daily bread to carry out those commands, ask for forgiveness of the debts we incur as a result of misusing God's gifts. And because of Satan's fury and our own weaknesses, we add in our specific circumstances the sixth petition: lead me not into temptation. How do we ask it? Consider this prayer:

"Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to me;
Lest I be full and deny You,
And say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or lest I be poor and steal,
And profane the name of my God" (Prov 30:8f).

That prayer comes from Agur, a contributor to the book of Proverbs. Agur was aware that he himself was too weak to withstand the temptation to be proud, too weak too to withstand the temptation to steal. So he prays for daily bread –nothing more and nothing less– prays for the bread needed to give to God the glory that is His due. He wants no temptation that comes from having riches, wants no temptation either that comes from poverty. It's a prayer in line with the sixth petition.

This is what the disciples of old were to pray, and this is what we are to pray. 'Lord, please don't give me too much of wealth, lest I get proud and self-sufficient; and please don't give me too little either,

lest I despair and trust you no longer. For, O God, I can't withstand on my own strength the enticement Satan lays before me in money' Or: 'Father, please keep me away from drinking parties, lest I lose control over my mind and say things that profane Your name. For, O Lord, I haven't the where-with-all to resist the temptation of so much drink when the boys are around' Or: 'Father, don't let me see things at the beach this summer that lead my mind to sin, for I don't have the where-with-all to resist temptations of the flesh.'

Conclusion

God gives many good things for us to enjoy. We need to recognize that our hearts and minds are sinful, that we are vulnerable to Satan's wiles. So we need to pray, without ceasing, that the Lord please spare us from Satan's attacks. Equally, when we come into temptation, we need to ask the Lord please to deliver us from the evil one.

As we pray, we may believe that the God who is our Father for Jesus' sake has overcome the evil one. We do not pray in vain!

Prayer – It is Certain - 1

The twelve disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In His grace the Lord gave them the instruction they sought. Then Jesus added these words: "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." And: "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:9ff).

This promise from our Saviour requires response on our part. We give our response when we add to our prayers that little word 'Amen'.

Meaning

The word "amen" appears frequently in the Bible. As an example, the Levites received instruction in Deuteronomy 27 to declare that any man who committed this or that sin was to be cursed, and the listening people were commanded –no less than 12 times– to respond with that word 'Amen'. One wonders: what did this 'Amen' mean? (cf here also Num 5:22; Neh 5:13).

We note that this 'Amen' was the response of the people to the words spoken by the Levites, was a response they were commanded to voice. That in itself already tells us that the word expresses *the reaction God wished the people to have* to these curses. What this reaction of the people was to be? The word "amen" was obviously not meant to convey simply the notion that the people *accepted* the curses upon possible sins, as if this Amen was simply an equivalent to "alright, OK, we'll accept that". The meaning of the term is much more profound than that.

The word "Amen" is at bottom not an English word; it's Hebrew. In our Bibles the word has not been translated. The word actually means "to believe". Abram had once been told that he would have a child. Yet as the years went by no child was granted. There came the day when Abram took his concern to God. God in turn responded by taking Abram outside and showing him the stars, and then added these words: "so [many] shall your descendants be" (Gen 15:5). Then we read these words: Abram "believed in the Lord." The Hebrew says 'Amen'; Abram "amened" in the Lord. We note that Abram did not simply believe that there was a God; Abram rather *accepted for truth and fact the promise God had just spoken*. With the word "amen", Abram indicated his conviction that *God would surely do as He had just said He would do*. Here we receive a little taste of what 'Amen' means; with the word 'Amen' one *gives expression to one's conviction that what the previous speaker has said will surely come to pass*.

It's this understanding of the word 'Amen' that we are to have in mind as we read Deuteronomy 27.

The people had to say 'Amen' not to indicate their simple consent that curses should come upon disobedience. Rather, with the word 'Amen' the people were instructed to *confess their faith*, to express their heartfelt conviction that God would certainly do as He had promised to do. God made a promise to Abram in Gen 15 about children; Abram responded to that promise by believing it, holding those words for true and certain – God would surely do as He said He would do. God made a promise to Israel in Deut 27 about curses; Israel was to respond to that promise by *believing* it, holding those words for true and certain – God would surely do as He said He would do.

It is that same meaning for the word "Amen" that we are to bear in mind when we meet the word elsewhere in Scripture. Jeremiah was told by God to speak to the people of Israel about the redemption God had given them from Egypt, to speak too about the curse that was to come upon every person who did not listen to the words of God's covenant. Jeremiah's response to these words of God was, "Amen, Lord" (Jer 11:5). In other words: 'Lord, I accept as true and certain this word that has come from Your mouth; I believe that You will certainly bring Your curse upon any who refuses to listen to Your voice.'

Confession of Faith

The word Amen is, however, not used only to indicate the response of a person or people to the curses of another. The word is used also as one's response to *words of praise* one has just heard. When David brought the ark of God into Jerusalem, he sang this song:

"Save us, O God of our salvation...,
[that we may] give thanks to Your holy name,
to triumph in Your praise.
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!"

The response of the people is this: "and all the people said 'Amen'" (I Chron 16:35f). Elsewhere we read these words: "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen' ..." (Neh 8:6).

Here is praise for God, and in both these cases those who hear these words of praise voice their 'Amen', and so express their conviction that Yes, it's true, God is to be blessed from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord is the great God. This 'Amen' is again a *confession of faith*; the hearers profess that the words spoken are true and shall always be true – God is blessed and God is great now and always. "Amen."

New Testament is the Same

Similarly, the well-known words of Rom 11:

"for of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory for ever.
Amen" (vs 36; cf Rom 9:5; Gal 1:5; Eph 3:21; etc).

Think too of those words from Rev 5:

"...every creature...I heard saying,
'Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!'"

and the four living creatures responded with "Amen" (vs 13f). Time and again a statement is made about the greatness and the glory of God, and repeatedly the word "Amen" follows those words of praise, follows it to give expression to one's faith that Yes, those words of praise are *so true, so correct*; I believe that God is great, all glorious.

Conclusion

It's this word "Amen" that we voice at the end of our prayers. What, then, are we saying with that word? The Biblical meaning of the word does not allow us room to think that the term means something like "this is The End of my prayer." The Biblical meaning of the word instead implies that with this word 'Amen' at the end of our prayer we are *professing our faith*, we are expressing our conviction that the words just prayed will come to pass.

Prayer – It is Certain - 2

According to the Sermon on the Mount, it was Jesus Himself who told us to conclude our prayers with the word "amen" (Mt 6:13). In other words, it was Jesus who told us to confess, at the end of our prayers, the conviction that God will do as He has said He would do.

Truth is though, that this understanding of the word "Amen" at the end of our prayers gives us some problems. The idea of somebody speaking words of praise to God and then saying "Amen", "I believe that God is truly God," yes, that's understandable. But our prayers are not simply thanksgiving and praise; our prayers, according to the command of Christ Himself, include also many requests. And that's where we have a problem. What does 'Amen' mean after a number of petitions have been brought to God? Does that word at this point also give voice to our heartfelt belief that the words spoken are true and certain; God will certainly do as we have asked? No, we find that rather far-fetched; we don't feel comfortable being convinced that we'll get what we ask. In fact, in the course of our lives we've asked so much, and certainly have not received all we requested. So we're not so sure that the word 'Amen' at the end of our prayers is really meant to be a confession of our conviction that God hears and answers....

God gives what He promised to give

It's to be clear in our minds and hearts that the word "Amen", also in our prayers, always *is and remains a profession of faith*, of faith in God. That may be obvious to us about prayers of praise, but it's equally true also of prayers that are made up mostly of petitions, requests.

How so? With that word 'Amen' in the context of a prayer of request, we're expressing our conviction that *God will give us what we ask*. We express the conviction that God will give what we ask because God has *promised to give us what we ask*. With that word 'Amen' at the end of our prayers, we are responding to God's promise to answer our petitions. With that word 'Amen', we are voicing our faith that God will answer our prayers as He has promised, will do it in the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Before you through aside this paper in disbelief, before you protest that God has definitely not given to you all you've asked, allow me to remind you of Jesus' words in Luke 11. Jesus said:

"And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (vs 9f).

Jesus' language is clear: ask and we shall receive. But – the Lord would not have us ask for anything and everything that may fancy our sinful minds. Those words about asking and receiving were spoken in a specific context, and that context is that of vs 1: the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, to which request Jesus answered by giving the Lord's Prayer. But Jesus did more than tell His disciples which petitions they were to bring before God; Jesus also told them to pray *with confidence*, to pray with the conviction that God would give what His people asked. Hence that parable about the Midnight Friend (Luke 11:5-8) who will surely rise and give whatever he needs, and the lesson for the disciples: "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you" (vs 9).

No, the disciples were not to ask for just anything and expect to get it; the disciples were to ask for the things which Jesus in the Lord's Prayer commanded them to ask. The promise of the Saviour in Luke 11 is that whatever is asked of God *in accordance with the Lord's Prayer* will certainly be granted; whatever falls within the framework of those petitions the Father in heaven will certainly give to His children.

So: the petitions Jesus instructs His children to pray are *more* than petitions; the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are *also promises*, promises that God will grant these specific things to those who ask Him for these. *That* is the notion we echo when we say "Amen" at the end of our prayers. With that word we express our hearty conviction, our faith, that God will surely grant the things He commanded us to ask. He told us to ask for daily bread, so we ask for daily bread in the conviction that God will give it. That's why we say 'Amen'; we confess the conviction that God will do as He has said.

God is the 'Amen'

Why might it be that we can be so convinced that God will give us what we ask, will give us what He promised to give us? That is because of *who* God is. Said Jesus of Himself: I am "the Amen" (Rev 3:14). And the point of that title is that every word spoken by Jesus Christ is believe-able; whatever He says He'll do He certainly will do. It was with that very truth that Jesus worked time and again in His public ministry; repeatedly He called attention to His words by saying "truly, truly, I say to you" (cf Jn 16:23). Or, as Jesus actually said in the original: "Amen, amen, I say to you." Believe-able He was. And that's why the words He spoke in Luke 11 are also believable; we can accept them for true and certain, we can expect to receive what we ask for simply because Jesus said that God would give what we request.

In this context we are to remember that the many promises God had made to Israel in the past, promises of blessings and promises of curses, were all ultimately fulfilled in the Son, Jesus Christ. As promised in the Old Testament, He came to pay for sin, to be rejected of God, to undergo God's hellish wrath, to die. Though it was not easy for the Father to give up His only dearly beloved Son for the suffering of the cross, He yet gave Him up, sent Him –why?– because He had promised to do so. Christ Himself is ultimately *the* evidence that God is true (Is 65:16), that His word is believable, that He will do as He said He will do. God had promised the Christ so long ago, and *did what He said He'd do*. That's why the apostle Paul can say of Jesus: "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen" (II Cor 1:20).

We believe that God has fulfilled His Word, has sent His Son into the world to atone for our sins, to reconcile us to God, to make us children of God. But if –as Paul says– God "did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). That's the promise we have, a promise that comes from the mouth of God as certainly as that promise about children for Abram came from the mouth of God. Abram believed the Lord's word, 'amened' that word; it is for us to do the same, to believe His promise, to say "Amen" to those promises. He's promised daily bread? Then we *believe* the promise. We'll ask for daily bread, and as soon as we've asked for it we'll say 'Amen', we'll confess our conviction that we shall surely receive the daily bread we need, shall definitely receive all we need to live for God and His glory. We'll say it because we're convinced that God is going to keep His promise, is going to give to me what I ask. After all, He is *God*, my Father for Christ's sake.

Comforting Encouragement

Have we assurance that our prayers will be heard, that God will answer? Or have our prayers of the past in fact been a waste of time? On the basis of what God has said in His Word, it will be clear that No, our time in prayer has not been wasted time; more, our prayers are heard – *unless*, of course, we ask from God things we weren't meant to ask in the first place. What we lay before the throne of God concerning our personal circumstances, what we lay before God with the request that through us in our circumstances His name be hallowed, through us in our circumstances His kingdom be made to come, through us in our circumstances His will be done; the daily bread we seek from God so that in our

circumstances we may do His will to His greater glory, the forgiveness we seek for our own personal sins, the deliverance we seek in our concrete circumstances from Satan's temptations so that we may receive forgiveness and so receive daily bread, and so do God's will, and so make His kingdom come to His greater glory – these many requests are always heard! For Jesus' sake our Father in heaven lends His ear to every such request, and hears and answers.

True, He may not answer our petitions in the way we would like. But God's ways are higher than our ways, and so it's for us to *believe* that He hears and answers.

Yes, that gives great encouragement to continue praying. The *promise* of God stands firm, and so with confidence let us bring our requests to God, with confidence let us work with the promises He has given, and let us believe without a shadow of doubt that Father hears His children and definitely gives to us whatever He has promised to give.

God has promised it. And so I believe it. "Amen!"