# PRAYER & REVELATION
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## PREFACE

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

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

The truth is that experience is the worst teacher, especially when it comes to learning spiritual things.[4] Our culture exalts learning by experience, and many Christians assume such a view even though it contradicts their professed allegiance to God and Scripture. Against this popular view, I urge that we must dethrone experience and exalt revelation, that is, the words of Scripture. This means that reading a book can really teach you a lot

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

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

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

[4] Please see the chapter, "Prayer and Experience," for more about this.

about prayer,[5] and since I would like to show you some of the things that Scripture teaches about the subject, it makes sense that I have written this book.[6]

[5] But many books on prayer are destructive because they exalt experience at the expense of theological depth and accuracy.

[6] Reading about prayer is not the same as praying, so I am not saying that you should read about prayer *instead* of praying. But when it comes to *learning* about prayer, we should read about it, talk about it, and think about it. That said, perhaps most people should indeed pray less, but spend more time reading, talking, and thinking about it. Reverence demands that we learn how to approach God in the manner prescribed by him, and we learn that from Scripture, not from experience or observation.

## PRAYER AND THE TRIUNE GOD

The doctrinal formulation for the Trinity is that God is "one in essence, and three in persons." This does not entail a contradiction, since we are not saying that God is "one in essence, and three in essence," or that God is "one in person, and three in persons." That is, we are not saying that God is one and three in the same sense, but that he is one in one sense, and three in another sense. Therefore, there is no contradiction in the doctrine of the Trinity.

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

However, this does not translate into polytheism. The above does not compel us to affirm the existence of three distinct and independent Gods. This is because the God of the Bible is by definition a Trinity; therefore, one Trinity constitutes only one God. For example, if by definition a normal human body includes two kidneys, then the fact that I have two kidneys does not mean that I consist of two human bodies. Since by definition each normal human body has two kidneys, the very fact that I have two kidneys means that I have one normal human body. Likewise, the biblical definition of deity is that God is a Trinity, so if there is one Trinity of divine persons, there is one God.

There is no other God besides the God of the Bible, and the God of the Bible is a Trinity. Even by itself, this doctrine sets Christianity apart from all other worldviews and philosophies, whether religious or secular. Since this is a foundational belief about reality that contradicts all other worldviews on their views of reality, it means that if Christianity is true, then all other religions and philosophies are false, and if even one non-Christian religion or philosophy is true, then Christianity is false. Christians should be unafraid to affirm this, and to defend Christianity as the exclusive truth in private conversations and public debates.[7]

The following three chapters discuss the relationship between prayer and each person in the Trinity.

[7] Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions*.

## 1. PRAYING THROUGH THE SON

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

One of the first things that you must know about prayer is that you do not have access to God unless you are a Christian. Prayer is not just about what you say, but an important aspect of it is where you stand in relation to God. The enemy of God clearly does not have the same privileges in prayer as the friend of God. Since the Bible teaches that the only way a person can have a right relationship with God is through Jesus Christ, only prayers offered by a Christian are acceptable to God. Relating prayer to the Trinitarian God portrayed in Scripture, this means that only prayers presented through God the Son, Jesus Christ, are acceptable to God the Father.

Some have proposed the absurd and unbiblical interpretation of the exclusivity of Christianity so as to say that Christ has made access to God possible for humanity in general so that even a non-Christian may pray to God through him in a certain sense. "Of course Jesus Christ is the only way to God," they may acknowledge, "but this means that if you are a sincere Muslim or Buddhist, you are saved through Christ." Not all of them would say it in these words, but this is what their theory amounts to. However, this is clearly a rejection of scriptural teaching on the subject, only that these people do not want to be explicit about it.

Thus by "Jesus Christ," I do not mean an abstract principle or spirit of "Christ" that is detached from the historical Jesus in the Bible or from his identity as the second person of the Trinity. What I mean is that short of a conscious and explicit affirmation of what the Scripture says about the historical person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, no one can have access to God. In other words, if you do not explicitly affirm the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and that these doctrines contradict all other religions, then you are not a Christian, and you do not have access to God. You are not acceptable to God, and you will suffer endless torment in hell after death. This is what Scripture teaches, and this is what I mean. Just as you cannot say that you are a Christian if you believe that there is more than one God, do not say that you are a Christian if you think that Muslims will go to heaven, or that Buddhists in some sense have access to God through Christ.

The Bible says that God has chosen some people to be saved, and those whom he has chosen will approach him, but only through Jesus Christ. All others are excluded and condemned.[8] That is, only true Christians are saved and have access to God, and all non-Christians are condemned to hell and do not have access to God. This is what the Bible teaches, and this is Christianity. If you disagree with it, then you have rejected Christianity, and I challenge you to refute it. If you claim that this is only my

[8] See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*, for an exposition on the doctrines of election and reprobation.

interpretation of Christianity, then at least you must refute me.[9] It is dishonest and irrational to dismiss this view just because you do not like it – suppressing the truth is one of the major sins by which countless individuals will be condemned forever (Romans 1:18-19). Maybe you agree with what I have said, but you do not think that it should be stated so bluntly. If this is what you think, then you must also offer arguments to establish your claim.

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

It is impossible to define religion in a way that includes all the thought systems that these people want to include, or exclude those that they want to exclude. For example, if I define religion as "the service or worship of God or the supernatural,"[10] then this may exclude some forms of Buddhism. But those who say that all religions are essentially the same usually want to include Buddhism.

I may change my definition to, "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith,"[11] which should be broad enough to include Buddhism, but then I cannot exclude communism. Another dictionary gives a similar possible definition: "any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values, etc.,"[12] and with this gives humanism as an example. But if we include communism and humanism as religions, then we must also include totalitarianism and democracy. But are communism, totalitarianism, and democracy essentially the same? And are all these essentially the same with Buddhism and Christianity?

For the sake of simplicity, I have given examples only from the dictionaries. Although texts on the philosophy of religion are more detailed in their attempts to define religion, their efforts fail to overcome the difficulties illustrated. The point is that no matter how our opponents define religion, the definition is either going to be too narrow or too broad for their purpose – they are going to include certain systems that they want to exclude, or they are going to exclude certain systems that they want to include. The difficulty exists because the various religions are not essentially the same; they contradict one another on many essential points. The implication is that not all of them can be correct, and thus it is impossible to unite them.[13] A more productive project would be to identify and clarify the

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[9] Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology* and *Ultimate Questions*.
[10] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; "religion."
[11] Ibid.
[12] *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*; "religion."
[13] Someone said to me that she thought religion was about unity, and she meant the unity of the human race. But this is precisely what the Tower of Babel was about. No, religion is not about unity, at least this is not what Christianity is about. Christianity is about revealed truth, and if enough people affirm the truth to unite around it, then all the better.

beliefs of each religion, and examine each one to see which ones are true and which ones are false.

Since Christianity claims to be the only true worldview,[14] if it is indeed a true worldview, then its claim to be the only truth is also true, and all other worldviews are therefore false. On the other hand, if any non-Christian worldview is true, then Christianity is false. Therefore, any adherent to a non-Christian worldview must squarely face Christianity and defeat it, and any Christian must be prepared to demolish any non-Christian worldview. To make the worldviews appear to be in essential agreement when they are in essential disagreement is dishonest, ignorant, and irrational.[15]

When people say that all religions are essentially the same, they are usually only thinking of a non-foundational aspect of the religions, or an aspect that is foundational to some, but non-foundational to others. But then they are no longer comparing the essential points of the various religions.

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

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

Thus to say that both Buddhism and Christianity teach people to be good does not establish any essential similarity between the two systems, but merely hides the essential differences. Christianity affirms as its essential claims that God is a Trinity, that Christ is both God and man, and that Scripture is infallible. There are others, but these three beliefs are enough to exclude all non-Christian systems, and to establish that Christianity is essentially contradictory to all non-Christian worldviews, including Judaism.[16]

Many of those who say that all religions are essentially the same tend to emphasize what they perceive as similarities in the area of ethics. I disagree with this approach, because as I have shown above, different religions may construct their ethics upon different views

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[14] It claims to be the only true system of thought, whether religious or secular.

[15] Vincent Cheung, *The Light of Mind*.

[16] I do not say that Christianity contradicts the Old Testament, but it contradicts Judaism. Although we can find the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, Judaism denies both. Those who were saved under the Old Covenant were not saved apart from Christ (see John 8:56; Hebrews 11:26). Thus our contention is that Judaism does not follow the Old Testament. Rather, the whole Bible – Old and New Testaments – is a Christian book, and only a Christian book. It endorses no other worldview or religion.

of metaphysics (or reality), which to them is more foundational. One does not have the right to dictate to all the religions what is essential to them and what is not. Rather, we must allow each religion to specify its central claims. If I say that monotheism[17] is foundational to my religion,[18] then you have no right to say that it is not foundational to my religion. And you would be mistaken to say that my *monotheistic* religion is essentially the same with another person's *polytheistic* religion, even if our systems of ethics are identical.[19]

However, Christian ethics is not identical to non-Christian ethics. They are not even similar. You may say that all religions direct people to walk in love and goodness. First, this is not true. The ethical aims and directives of various religions are often very different. Second, how do you define love and goodness? The Bible says that love is the fulfillment of the biblical moral laws, so that if you walk in love, you will obey the commands in the Bible. But if your religion defines love differently, as all non-biblical religions must do, then whatever you call love is not what the Bible calls love. Therefore, it is impossible to say that all religions direct people to walk in love, since even though you attempt to use the same word to describe their moral directives, they are not similar at all, and there is no common concept of love.

The very first of the Ten Commandments demands exclusive worship of the Christian God. Therefore, from a biblical viewpoint, it is immoral and sinful to be a non-Christian. Now, who are you to say that this is not an essential belief in Christianity? It is just as essential as the commandment against murder, and much more important and foundational, since even the commandment against murder is founded upon the exclusive authority of God. Now, do all religions have as their essential belief that they are to worship only the Christian God? If not, then how are they the same with Christianity?

It may be possible under both democracy and communism to affirm that there are such things as red roses, but that does not mean that democracy and communism are the same, or even similar to each other, because they differ on the essential points. Those who attempt to unite all religions arbitrarily choose certain points that they perceive to be common to all religions, and then make these points the essential points of all religions. But they have no right to dictate and specify the essential points of all religions, and even on those points that they think all religions agree, the various religions in fact do not agree. The truth is that the various religions are different, and they contradict one another on many essential and non-essential points. Therefore, not all religions can be true. Since Christianity says that all other religions are false, if we can show that Christianity is true, then even this pronouncement about all non-Christian religions is true, and thus we have also shown that all non-Christian religions are false.

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[17] Not just any conception of a monotheistic God, but the one with all the attributes specified in the Bible, including his triune nature.

[18] Elsewhere I state that the infallibility of Scripture is my first principle of reasoning, but within the system revealed by Scripture, metaphysics indeed precedes ethics.

[19] Christians and Buddhists may both believe "1 + 1 = 2," but that does not mean that Christianity and Buddhism are essentially the same. Two worldview are *essentially* the same only when they are the same on the *essential* points.

My exclusive view is unpopular today, even among those who call themselves Christians. However, popularity does not indicate whether a particular belief is true or false. A common objection against exclusive religion is that it is arrogant to say that my own position is the only correct one, and that all who disagree with me are wrong.[20] But what is your definition of arrogance? If Christianity itself asserts that I must accept it to be the only true religion and consider all non-Christian religions to be false, then under Christianity I am not arrogant to take such an exclusive position. You can only call me arrogant based on a non-Christian standard. If so, then you must establish the non-Christian worldview by which you call me arrogant to be true, and that Christianity is false. If you fail to do this, then you have no authority to call me arrogant.

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

I may give a similar response to the charge that it is narrow-minded to say that only my view is correct, and all who disagree with me are wrong. But why is it bad to be narrow-minded? By what standard do you determine that to be narrow-minded is bad, and then impose that label on me? If Christianity is indeed exclusively true, then it would be a good thing to be "narrow-minded." That is, if only Christianity is true, then it would be good to believe that only Christianity is true, whether you call that narrow-minded or not. But if Christianity is exclusively true, and you remain open-minded about the issue, then you are not affirming the truth, and you are the one who has a problem.

The people who use the charges of arrogance, narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and the like, are in fact employing a name-calling tactic that, if successful, enables them to avoid facing the real questions. Is Christianity exclusively true or not? If not, you do not need to call me names – just refute me, and that will be the end of it. Since I perceive that name-callers are trying to avoid confrontation, I can also play the name-calling game and say that they are idiots and cowards, and we can go back and forth forever without facing the real questions. If you disagree with the claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and that all non-Christians will be condemned to endless torment in hell, all you have to do is to confront my arguments and refute the claim.

Even many professing Christians would consider me too harsh, but this is because they have been affected by non-Christian standards of right conduct. If the apostle Paul could tell the opposing Jews to castrate themselves (Galatians 5:12),[21] then I am already being quite mild.[22] Many of the Christian writers who affirm that only Christianity is true

[20] The charge of arrogance is often just an attempt to avoid having to confront the rational arguments that have been offered.

[21] "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!"

[22] I have seen very few arguments supporting the assumption that we should be somewhat charitable when dealing with non-Christian views. I demand a deductive argument from an infallible premise from my

nevertheless sound reluctant to bluntly state this belief, and they are just as reluctant to clearly state its implication, that if only Christianity is true, then all non-Christian religions are false. They grudgingly affirm the exclusivity of Christianity, as if they resent the Bible for containing such a teaching. This attitude is sinful. Instead, they ought to embrace and defend the words of Scripture with force and with joy. Anything less indicates an unscriptural empathy to false religions and sinful humanity at the expense of faithfulness to Christ.

You will have to read some of my other books to see my arguments for Christianity,[23] but what I have established here is that the various religions are essentially different and opposed to one another. Therefore, if you claim to be a Christian, then by necessary implication, you are also saying that all non-Christian religions are false, and that all non-Christians will be condemned to endless torment in hell. If you have a problem with this, then you should examine to see if you have truly affirmed Christianity, for if you disagree with Christ and the apostles, then on what grounds do you claim to be a Christian? Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). If you are not a Christian, then you are not just non-Christian in your beliefs, but you are anti-Christian. This is the way it is, whether you like it or not.

In the context of church government, one who affirms religious pluralism and the legitimacy of non-Christian religions or worldviews should have the implications of such a belief shown to him. The church should make clear to such a person what the Bible teaches on the subject. After that, if the person refuses to change his mind, then he should be excommunicated, or expelled from the church. We must begin to realize that believing false doctrine is much more sinful and destructive than something like murder or prostitution. False doctrine is a much greater evil than these other things, and we must protect the flock by removing those who insist on affirming unbiblical ideas: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). One reason why much of the church is so weak today is a lack of swift discipline.

Since I have established the exclusive truth of Christianity elsewhere, and since I have exposed the absurdity of asserting the essential unity of all religions, we may proceed with the assumption that Christianity is exclusively true, and that all non-Christian religions are false. Thus we may with greater appreciation return to the teaching stated earlier, that only Christians may offer prayers that are acceptable to God. Putting this another way, for one's prayer to be acceptable, he must have a right relationship with God, but to have a right relationship with God, he must first have a right relationship with the designated mediator between God and humanity.

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opposition on this issue, and the only way to satisfy this is an exegetical and theological argument from Scripture. But this can only support my way of dealing with non-Christian ideas; that is, with ruthless honesty. People often say that we should "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), but this cannot mean, "speak the truth softly and in an effeminate style, so as not to offend anyone," for if the verse in fact teaches this, then were not Christ, the prophets, and the apostles in violation? They were blunt and very fierce when they spoke against error.

[23] Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology* and *Ultimate Questions*. If you disagree with my defense of the Christian faith as the only true worldview, then you must refute me. Too many people simply dismiss sound arguments that they do not wish to believe. This is dishonest and irrational.

The only mediator between God and humanity is Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. We are not talking about some general principle of Christ or the "spirit" of Christ, but the historical Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son who took upon himself human attributes, who died for his people and was raised from the dead. You cannot be a Muslim or Buddhist and say that you are somehow praying through Christ. You cannot say that you can be a Mormon or Hindu, but as long as you pray with a certain attitude or spirit, you are praying through Christ. You cannot say that Christ is somehow the mediator of all these religions. No, the Bible requires that you acknowledge by name the historical Jesus of Nazareth, who is both God and man, and who is the sole mediator between God and humanity. He is the only way to God; all other roads lead to endless torment in hell.

Some groups that claim to affirm the Christian faith suggest that saints and angels may act as mediators between God and humanity, so that they may appeal to, say, Mary the mother of Jesus for help and for intercession. This is a direct rejection of scriptural teaching. 1 Timothy 2:5 says that there is only one mediator, not two or three, or three hundred. There is only one. Outside of Jesus Christ, there is no access to God at all. Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and humanity, but he does not give to all humans proper access to God. Rather, through him only Christians have access to God the Father in prayer and worship.

## 2. PRAYING TO THE FATHER

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

If you are not a Christian, then you are not a child of God, but you are a child of the devil. All human beings are God's creatures, and this much is true. But when we are speaking of the relationship that we have with God, then humanity is divided into the children of God and the children of the devil. And ever since the beginning of human history, the two groups have been in conflict against each other (Genesis 3:15).

Those who think that all human beings are the children of God are ignorant of what the Bible says on the subject. Jesus says that the "father" of his opponents is the devil, and that they make their disciples twice as much the children of hell as they (John 8:44; Matthew 23:15). Paul writes:

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

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

When Jesus teaches his disciples to address God as their Father, he immediately excludes all non-Christians from having access to God. Rather, all who approach God the Father must do so through God the Son, Jesus Christ. Christians have the Spirit of Christ in their hearts by which they may legitimately call God their Father. Thus being a Christian is the prerequisite to having any positive relationship with God.

This exclusive view is contrary to what many people want to believe. Even some who call themselves Christians hesitate to state the biblical position in such an explicit manner. However, since the above is what the Bible teaches, we must never do anything to obscure the message. If Christians have not been so afraid to offend people, we would not have so many false converts in our churches today.

Is what I am saying hard and offensive to you? People complained against what Jesus teaches also: "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you?'" (John 6:60-61). How does Jesus handle their discontent? Instead of trying to qualify his teaching so as to soften it, he bluntly applies the doctrine of election to their case: "He went on to say, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him'" (v. 65). His statement is not well received, for the next verse says, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (v. 66).[24]

If you are offended by the straightforward and no-nonsense presentation of the gospel, then God has not chosen you for salvation, and you have no ability to accept it. Or, it is possible that you are among the elect, but God has decided for you to accept the gospel later. In any case, what many Christians fail to realize is that the non-elect *should* be offended at the gospel message. We are not supposed to distort it so that it offends no one. The gospel offends people not because it is irrational, for it is rationally invincible. But the non-elect are offended at the true gospel precisely because they are both irrational and sinful, and God has not regenerated them so that they may react to the gospel in a positive way (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

Maybe you are one of the many false converts in our churches, and no one has made clear to you the gospel message. Do you think that you are a Christian just because you muttered the "sinner's prayer"? Do you think that you are a Christian, even when you have not explicitly or implicitly renounced all non-Christian religions and philosophies as false? If you have affirmed a "gospel" that does not exclude other religions, then you have not affirmed the true gospel. My suggestion to you is the same one that Paul gives to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Jesus teaches that we should pray to God the Father. Since the Father is a divine mind and not a non-rational object, we are to use intelligible language to express our thoughts, and this excludes all the religions that do not deal with a divine rational person. And since we must pray to the "Father," a definite person, not just any person will do; rather, we must only pray to the divine Father of the Bible.

This "Father" is defined by many distinct attributes the sum of which restricts our conception of him to a very specific person, so as to make us realize that prayers made to any other person is misdirected. It also means that we must gain an accurate grasp of how the Bible defines this divine person, so that the conception of God in our minds will correspond to the conception of God as revealed in Scripture.

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[24] If you have wondered whether we should include the doctrine of election when preaching the gospel, here is your answer. Jesus tells them to their face that they could not believe unless the Father enables them. However, we may not always need to mention this doctrine in evangelism; I only mean that we should not deliberately avoid mentioning it.

The above leads us to reject the notion that it matters little what you believe about God as long as you are sincere. It is possible to sincerely believe something and be mistaken. To sincerely believe in the Buddha does not make you acceptable to God, since from a Christian perspective, you would just be sincerely sinful. What God requires is that we sincerely affirm the truth; although faith is important, the object of faith is also important. We must believe the right doctrines. We must define "God" – the object of our faith – according to the attributes ascribed to him in the Bible.

Before dealing with some of the central divine attributes in relation to our context, that we must direct our prayers to the Father brings up a point that is particularly relevant to our times, namely, much of feminist theology is contrary to biblical teaching, and thus must be rejected and opposed. For example, although God is without gender, since he reveals himself in the Bible in male roles and with male pronouns, we are to address him as "Father" and not "Mother," with "he" and not "she." I would like to deal with the threat of feminist theology more thoroughly and systematically elsewhere, and I realize that its subversive ideas relate to more than this one issue in our example. For now, we should at least recognize that the central agenda of feminist theology is anti-Christian;[25] therefore, let us determine to challenge the unbiblical assertions from its proponents whenever they may come up, and excommunicate the unrepentant. We will now return to discuss the divine attributes.

"God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16) is frequently recited by people who wish to prove certain points about their conception of God, or of what God would do or would not do. These people make a number of inferences from the proposition, "God is love," that they think should be true if indeed God is love. But what is love? And what does it mean for God to be love? It certainly does not follow that a God who is love will not send anyone to hell, since the same Bible says that he sends many people to hell. It also does not follow that a God who is love will accept non-Christians, since the same Bible says that he rejects non-Christians.

Some people like to emphasize "God is love" because they falsely think that the divine attribute of love will spare them from the judgment promised to those who disobey God. For example, they may say that since "God is love," then he also loves the homosexual and will not judge him. But since this inference contradicts other propositions in the Bible, it is a false inference.

The love of God does not contradict the other things that the Bible says about God. We must define love correctly. Further, the same Bible that says, "God is love," also says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). How come this verse, which is in the same letter by the apostle John, is so seldom mentioned? Perhaps it has something to do with the next verse, which explains what "God is light" implies: "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (v. 6). Walking with God requires adherence to his standard of right living, and if

[25] See Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1992; John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*; Crossway Books, 1991.

you do not do this, then you are not walking with God. Thus this very passage about the light of God shines upon those who hides under the darkness of a distorted interpretation of "God is love," and exposes the fact that they are not really walking with God.

The same Bible that says, "God is love," also says that, "God is light." And the same Bible that says, "God is light," also says that, "God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). All three propositions are true, and they are consistent with one another, but the invalid inferences that people make from "God is love" often contradict the other two propositions. That God is a consuming fire does not mean that he will give you a warm and welcome feeling. The writer of Hebrews states this proposition in the context of telling his readers to worship God "with reverence and awe" (v. 28). The image of God being a consuming fire is associated with his anger, judgment, and power to destroy.[26] The modern man may disapprove of such a God, but what is wrong with such a God? If God comes at you as a consuming fire, it is you who are at fault. Paul tells his readers to recognize both the "kindness and severity" (Romans 11:22, NASB) of God. He says that he is severe against those who disobey him, but he is kind to you, that is, if you continue in his grace.

Many times I have heard preachers say, "God is not mad at anybody." This is false, and provides the non-Christians with false comfort. The Bible says that if you are a non-Christian, God is now very angry with you, and "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). Jesus says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus declares that he who is not with him is against him (Matthew 12:30); there is no neutral ground. You need not deliberately align yourself against Christ to be counted as his enemy, since you were born his enemy. 1 John 5:12 says, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." You may suppress your knowledge of God and your rebellion against him (Romans 1:18), but God is very aware, and you will not get away with anything (Hebrews 4:13).

If you are not a Christian, the great force of divine wrath will be poured out against you, perhaps in a moment you do not expect, and it is as if you will hear God say, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20). Of course, as I have explained elsewhere, the wrath of God is not an emotion, since God is not a man and has no emotions.[27] However, this should not give you any relief, because it remains that God's wrath is a policy of thought and action against his enemies that will stop at nothing short of effecting their utter destruction and endless suffering.

Today's preachers tend to obscure the wrath of God, and present him as a harmless and helpless clown. There are some "fire and brimstone" sermons, which the congregations detest, but even most of these sermons are not nearly terrifying enough to describe the horrors of hell, the helpless state of those without Christ, and the greatness of God's mercy toward his elect.

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[26] Deuteronomy 4:21-27, 9:3; Psalm 50:3, 97:3; Isaiah 66:15; Hebrews 10:27.
[27] Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology*.

I urge you to read the sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" by Jonathan Edwards.[28] It provides a much-needed biblical perspective about the sinner's condition. It is inappropriate to reproduce the sermon in full here, but here are several passages from it:

> The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose. It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.
>
> The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so with them; for destruction came suddenly upon most of them; when

[28] *The Words of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 2*; Hendrickson Publishers, 2000 reprint from 1834 edition; p. 7-12.

> they expected nothing of it, and while they were saying, "Peace and safety." Now they see, that those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin air and empty shadows.
>
> The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked – his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night, that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

The terrors of hell is indeed frightening, but surely, you think I will tell you, God has sent Christ to make salvation possible for everyone, even you, so that in the end you will determine your own destiny, that you can save yourself from endless torment. But God has not left even this for the sinner to determine. Jesus says that no one can be saved except the Father has chosen him; unless God first shows you mercy, you will not and cannot choose him. Thus even in this aspect you are powerless, and you are completely at his mercy. As Edwards states in his sermon, "It will be as it was on the great out-pouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days, the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded."

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

## 3. PRAYING BY THE SPIRIT

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

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

The exclusivity of Christianity continues to be important and relevant for the Christian, since he ought to retain a sense of gratitude and awe that he has indeed been chosen to approach God: "Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts" (Psalm 65:4, NKJ). Rather than having the arrogant and foolish attitude that God should thank the human individual for believing in the gospel, the human individual should develop his new life "in fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12-13), knowing that he is permitted in God's presence solely because of God's pleasure and discretion.

The Christian had done nothing to deserve salvation, and in himself he was no better than the non-Christian, who would be condemned to endless suffering in hell. The Christian can thus say nothing to congratulate himself, whether of his good sense for choosing Christ, since Christ says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16), or for his moral superiority, since "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). So then, let him who boasts boast not about himself, but about what God has done for him in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:31).

The Christian in himself was not intellectually and morally superior to the non-Christian. But make no mistake about it – once God changes and saves him, the Christian is indeed intellectually and morally superior. False humility and scriptural ignorance may cause many believers to deny this, but the Bible teaches that we have been enlightened and sanctified in Christ, and our spiritual growth involves increasing in knowledge and holiness. Also, the Bible calls unbelievers foolish and wicked in contrast to those who have been changed by God through Christ.

If you do not have superior wisdom, as God defines wisdom, then you have not been enlightened; if you do not have superior character, as God defines character, then you have not been transformed. Therefore, if you are not intellectually and morally superior than the unbelievers, then God has not done any work in you, and you are not even a Christian. To deny that Christians are intellectually and morally superior to non-Christians is to contradict Scripture, and insult the work of God.

The Holy Spirit gives Christians access to God, so as to make prayer possible. But he helps us in another way as well:

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

Some of the Greeks understood our limitations when it comes to prayer, and had reached corresponding conclusions about it: "Pythagoras forbade his disciples to pray for themselves, because, he said, they could never in their ignorance know what was expedient for them. Xenophon tells us that Socrates taught his disciples simply to pray for good things, and not to attempt to specify them, but to leave God to decide what the good things were."[29]

The Christian is not in such an unhappy condition, since Scripture reveals a considerable amount of knowledge about the will of God, so that from it we can deduce much information to understand and interpret our particular situations. The Bible itself claims to be sufficient, meaning that if you have complete knowledge of its content, and if you fully follow what it teaches, you will never transgress the will of God. Of course, no one has complete knowledge of the Bible, and no one fully follows it, and thus we must often ask God for his forgiveness. The point is that the Bible itself contains sufficient information, so that when we fail to live a perfect life before God, we may never say that it is because the Bible contains insufficient information (2 Peter 1:3).

That said, since we often do not know everything about a situation, even our own, and since we cannot know all the relationships between various events and options, we sometimes do not know what is the best thing to pray for in any situation. We may know what we want when it comes to our personal lives, but even then we may not know whether what we want is always best, or whether it conforms to the specific plan that God has for our lives.

This is just to say that we are not omniscient, and not that Scripture provides insufficient information. Failing to know everything is not a sin, but there remains the practical problem of not knowing what to pray. That is, it is not an issue of lacking the necessary information to achieve holiness, since the Scripture is indeed sufficient, but it is an issue of practical helplessness because of our human limitations.

The Spirit gives us access to God so that we may pray, but we do not always know for what we should pray. So, Paul says, "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." What does this mean?

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[29] William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans (The Daily Study Bible Series)*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1975; p. 112.

First, we need to clarify what "groans *that words cannot express*" may mean. If it is meant that these "groans" represent thoughts that are inexpressible by means of words, then this appears to be impossible. If words are only arbitrary signs that represent thoughts, then in principle words are capable of expressing any thought. For example, "X" can be a word representing any thought at all. No matter how profound a given thought is, if a mind can think it, then words can express it. In fact, "X" can designate an entire proposition or even all the propositions in an entire book; therefore, in themselves words are always adequate to express any thought.

But if the "groans" are not thoughts, and if they are not meant to produce thoughts in another mind, then they are not meant as vehicles of expression at all, and thus the word "cannot" would appear to be inapplicable to verbal communication. That is, there would be a category mistake if the verse indeed says that some thoughts cannot be expressed in words, since all thoughts can be expressed in words. And anything that can be expressed must either be thoughts, or must generate thoughts in another mind. Otherwise, the transaction cannot be rightly called communication. The verse must be translated or understood differently. Or, maybe this verse is saying that we do not have the intellectual clarity or ability to put these groans into words, but it is not saying that words themselves, or language itself, is deficient in expressing thoughts.

In any case, we must reject the popular notion that language is inherently incapable of expressing many things. This is nothing more than an anti-intellectual prejudice. The above shows that any limitation in expression must be in the mind, and not in language itself.

However, if Paul is indeed saying that the Spirit provides a solution to our limitation by "groans *that words cannot express*," so as to limit the ability of language itself to give expression to thoughts, then my argument must be wrong and we should not explain away the passage, but we must accept that there is indeed an inherent limitation in language. But a careful examination of the passage shows that we need not come to such a conclusion. Douglas Moo points out that the term translated "that words cannot express" in the NIV appears only here in biblical Greek, and the meaning implied by its etymology is more properly denoted by, "unspoken" or "wordless."[30] Likewise, Thomas Schreiner writes, "it much more likely means 'without speech,' the absence of any vocalization at all."[31] Whatever the "groans" are, they are not thoughts that are meant to be spoken; therefore, the verse does not say that there are any inherent limitations in language itself in giving expression to thoughts.

The groans are not literal audible sounds, but they are metaphorical. We find ample support for such an interpretation from the verses that precede our passage:

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[30] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996; p. 524.
[31] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*; Baker Books, 1998; p. 445.

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

Paul describes the tension and the frustration that we experience by living in the imperfect present while expecting the perfect future. We long for the completion of our salvation, even "the redemption of our bodies." And thus our "groaning" is not an audible sort, but a metaphor for the tension and frustration that we now experience. That this "groaning" is metaphorical is even clearer when we see that, in a sense, the creation itself shares this tension and this frustration, and "has been groaning" along with us. But the creation itself is not a rational entity, and does not literally groan as a woman suffering "the pains of childbirth." Therefore, the "groaning" in these verses represent an intense anticipation for the fulfillment of the plan of God, rather than an audible sound.

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

Schreiner writes the following:

> These groanings are not audible. They are the inexpressible longings that arise in every believer's heart to do and know the will of God. That the groanings arise *in the hearts of believers* is suggested by verse 27, which says that "God searches the hearts." This is most naturally understood to refer to the hearts of believers. God searches the hearts of believers and finds unutterable longings to conform their lives to the will of God. The Holy Spirit takes these groanings and presents them before God in an articulate form. Even though believers cannot specify these requests to God adequately since they do not know his will sufficiently, the Holy Spirit translates these groanings and conforms them to God's will.[32]

[32] Schreiner, p. 446.

The passage indeed implies that believers "do not know his will sufficiently,"[33] and that the passage says that the Holy Spirit does *something* about it, and this "something" is related to the "groans" mentioned. However, I disagree with Schreiner when he says that these groans are "in the hearts of believers" in the sense that these are the groans of the believers, which the Spirit transforms into acceptable prayers to God.

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

Assuming an understanding of the context of this passage, that is, at least verses 18-28, we may paraphrase as follows: "We do not always know for what to pray, but the Spirit prays for us inaudibly. Now, he who knows our thoughts also knows the Spirit's thoughts; therefore, although the Spirit prays inaudibly, God hears the Spirit's prayers for us. And such prayers are effective, since the Spirit prays for us in accordance with the will of God." The reason Paul refers to God as the one "who searches our hearts" may be because the Spirit is one who indwells believers, so that Paul seems to say, in effect, "He who knows your thoughts also knows the thoughts of the Spirit who lives in you."

Douglas Moo arrives at a similar conclusion, and writes:

> Moreover, it is likely that the groans are not the believer's but the Spirit's….it is preferable to understand these "groans" as the Spirit's own "language of prayer," a ministry of intercession that takes place in our hearts in a manner *imperceptible to us*. This means, of course, that "groans" is used metaphorically….I take it that Paul is saying, then, that our failure to know God's will and consequent inability to petition God specifically and assuredly is met by God's Spirit, who himself expresses to God those intercessory petitions that perfectly match the will of God….
>
> Verse 27 continues Paul's discussion of the intercession of the Spirit and focuses on the effectiveness of this intercession. The reason for this effectiveness is the perfect accord that exists

[33] Again, what the believers know insufficiently does not correspond to what the Scripture reveals sufficiently. That is, our lack of knowledge does not contradict the Scripture's claim to sufficient information, since the Scripture does not claim to supply what this passage says that we lack. Even so, I would maintain that if our knowledge of Scripture were to be complete, it is doubtful that much, or any, of the lack of knowledge referred to by this passage will remain.

> between God, "the one who searches hearts," and "the mind of the Spirit." God, who sees into the inner being of people, where the indwelling Spirit's ministry of intercession takes place, "knows," "acknowledges," and responds to those "intentions" of the Spirit that are expressed in his prayers on our behalf.[34]

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

Hebrews 7:25 indicates that *Jesus Christ* "always lives to intercede" for believers. Thus he has a ministry of intercession through which he prays for believers, and this ministry occurs independently of the believers themselves. In addition, it occurs in heaven, so that it is indeed "imperceptible to us." What our passage teaches is that the *Holy Spirit* also has a ministry of intercession. These preachers miss the point of the passage, whose very intent is to tell us that the Spirit has a ministry of intercession through which he prays for believers, and that this is an act that occurs independently of the believers themselves, so that it is also "imperceptible to us."

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

Jesus refers to the Spirit as "another Counselor" (John 14:16, or "Advocate"). That the Spirit should have a ministry of intercession for the benefit of Christians fits very well with his ministry of being the second Advocate, paralleling the ministry of Christ as the first Advocate. Christ now serves as our Advocate in heaven, and the Spirit now serves as the indwelling Advocate on earth. Both of them pray for us.

Just as the fact that Jesus Christ has a ministry of intercession on our behalf does not prevent or discourage us from praying, the fact that the Spirit also has a ministry of intercession on our behalf should not prevent or discourage us from praying. It may very well be true that the Spirit helps us pray, but the passage under discussion is saying that he himself prays for us to God, and since his prayers are always in accordance with the will of God, they are always effective, and this is something that we will examine later in this chapter.

Another contrary interpretation of our passage is that the "groans that words cannot express" refer to speaking in tongues. Since we do not always know for what to pray, the Spirit grants us words to speak in a language that we do not understand so as to bypass

[34] Moo, p. 526-527.

the limitations of our minds. However, if our interpretation of this passage is correct, we have already eliminated the possibility that Paul is referring to tongues. Our interpretation says that it is the Spirit who prays in inaudible "groans" in a manner that is apart from and imperceptible to believers, but this description excludes tongues altogether. This is not to say that the Bible does not endorse speaking in tongues; whether it does or not, *this passage* does not seem to have tongues in mind.

This brings me to a point related to speaking in tongues, although it is not directly relevant to our passage. Regardless of whether we think speaking in tongues is for today, and regardless of what we think it does, many people who speak in tongues use it in a way as to avoid having to struggle through the difficulties of praying in English (or their known languages). That is, whenever they find it hard to express themselves in English, or whenever they find it hard to extend the length of their prayers, they will simply begin speaking in tongues, and thus avoid having to exert further effort in prayer. As a result, some important aspects their spiritual growth are halted.

This is one criticism that Neil Babcox offers against speaking in tongues. Although he thinks that speaking in tongues is not for today, even if he is wrong about this, what he says below is still applicable:

> At no time are we more aware of our weakness and inadequacy than when we kneel to pray….In the face of such spiritual helplessness, tongues can become a crutch. For example, when I found myself mute and dumb in His presence, I could far too quickly remedy the situation by praying in tongues. Again, when I was oppressed with a sense of guilt and felt alienated from God, it was far more easy to pray in tongues than to search my heart for the cause of the guilt. But what was all of this if it was not an evasion? Whereas previously I could avoid the difficulties inherent in prayer by resorting to tongues, now I found myself praying, "Lord, teach me to pray."[35]

There are various reasons why you may have trouble praying in English, but almost all of them relate to deficiencies in the mind. Maybe your thoughts are unclear; maybe you are easily distracted; maybe you lack the ability to put your thoughts into words; or maybe your ignorance of scriptural teaching prevents you from properly relating to God. Whatever the reason may be, rather than giving up or resorting to tongues, you must struggle to attain fluency in pray. And since most of the problems are in the mind, this is the area that you must work on. Peter Kreeft writes, "The first cause of a specifically human act is always internal, not external. By 'a specifically human act' I mean one like asking a question, creating a work of art, making a moral choice, affirming another person, or appreciating the beauty of nature – or praying….That is why thought is where the action starts….Thought is the first battlefield."[36]

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[35] Neil Babock, *My Search for Charismatic Reality*; The Wakeman Trust, 1985; p. 65-66.
[36] Peter Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*; Ignatius Press, 2000; p. 38-41.

Although spiritual growth involves much effort and much struggle, if we have some sense of direction and purpose, and if we know what to work on, then the effort and the struggle will bear good fruit. The struggle in prayer should not consist mainly in forcing yourself to pray when you cannot pray well, but it should involve developing a spiritual mind by reading and thinking. If you wish to pray better, then you must make your thoughts clearer and richer. Thus the most important thing you can do to improve in prayer is theological study and reflection, which consists of much reading and thinking. For example, you will not be able to enrich your prayer and worship by engaging the divine attributes if you do not know about them. Meaningful prayer and worship depends on theological knowledge. Therefore, reading a book on systematic theology does much more to improve your prayer life than reading one that is specifically about prayer, but whose content is mainly pragmatic, anecdotal, or otherwise theologically shallow.

Jesus would sometimes spend an entire night praying, from evening to morning (Luke 6:12). The content of his mind was very rich and his knowledge was very broad. We cannot attain to his level, but we can strive to become better. And the Spirit is involved in all of this – it is he who grants us knowledge and understanding, who causes us to recall and obey the words of God, and who transforms our thinking and our character through Scripture. Although our passage does not specifically refer to the Spirit's role in helping us pray, but rather indicates that the Spirit prays for us, other biblical passages assure us that he is here to help us in every aspect of our spiritual life, including our struggle to pray better by establishing a foundation of greater knowledge and deeper reflection regarding the things of God.

Paul has been telling us about the Spirit's ministry of intercession. Because the Spirit always prays "in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8:27), his prayers are always effective. Verse 28 then describes the result of such an effective ministry: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."[37] The HCSB is better: "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose."[38]

Although Peter Masters is addressing another topic, the following warning against what he calls "pietistic speaking" also applies to how believers often misuse Romans 8:28:

> Many Christians have picked up a manner of thinking and speaking which is highly destructive to genuine guidance. We may call it – pietistic speaking. These friends constantly ascribe all kinds of everyday events to the special and direct intervention of the Lord, as though their lives were filled with minor miracles. They believe this kind of thinking and speaking is what the Lord wants from His people. They think that it reflects gratitude and a spiritual attitude. However, this trend often leads to a form of spiritual "superstition"…

[37] Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001 (original: 1663).
[38] *Holman Christian Standard Bible*; Holman Bible Publishers, 2000.

> It is significant that when believers pick up the habit of pietistic thinking and speaking, they tend to focus on…earthly rather than spiritual matters. And most significantly, they are usually good events, and not hard or painful ones. We have heard friends say: "The Lord sent a bus for me this morning," and, "The Lord enabled me to pass my exam, because actually I did very badly." Other comments about the Lord's direct interventions concern everyday affairs like the weather, or the Lord preventing the cakes from burning….
>
> We must not drift into the idea that only small, earthly and good things are examples of His providence. Why should we single out life's happy surprises and coincidences as instances of God's work in our lives? Why not talk about the days when nothing remarkable happened? Why not talk about illnesses and times of failure? After all, God superintends all that happens to His children.[39]

The relevance of the above to a correct understanding of Romans 8:28 is in the fact that we must define "good" the way God defines it, and not the way we would like to define it. In our passage, Paul is trying to give us a proper perspective from which to interpret the things that we suffer in this life. He says in verse 18, "I consider that *our present sufferings* are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." So when verse 28 says that "all things work together for the good," the "all things" should really include "all things." In fact, Romans 9 indicates that even the creation and destruction of the reprobates serve to glorify God and edify Christians.

But the main emphasis on Romans 8:28 appears to be on suffering. Most people assumes this to be so even without noting the context of the passage, but they may still misunderstand the verse if they assume a false definition of "good." For example, the verse cannot mean, "All things, whether good or bad, work together for your good – that is, to make you rich." The "good" in our verse cannot mean material riches because that is not how God defines "good." Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Nor can the verse mean, "All things, whether good or bad, work together for your good – that is, to make you popular," because God does not define "good" as popularity.

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

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[39] Peter Masters, *Steps for Guidance*; The Wakeman Trust, 1995; p. 119-122.

However, this is not to say that God does not give us pleasant things. In the context of admonishing wealthy people, Paul writes that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). The point is not that God only gives us pleasant or unpleasant things, or that only certain things further our sanctification, but that *all things* work together by the providence and wisdom of God to further the great purpose of our sanctification, which refers to our increase in knowledge and in holiness (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24).

But then we return again to the exclusivity of Christianity, for all things work together for good, not for everyone, but only for "those who love God" (v. 28). Paul writes, "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (1 Corinthians 16:22). We have already seen from other verses that the wrath of God remains on non-Christians, and there is no escape from judgment except through Jesus Christ.

Who then are "those who love God"? Are they those who have chosen Christ by their own "free will"? Are they those who have the good sense and moral propensity to accept the gospel? Scripture states that no one can choose God unless God has first chosen him. Thus the verse says that those who love God are those "who are called according to His purpose." It does not say that they are those who love God because they have chosen to love him according to their own reasons, but that they love God because they have been chosen by him according to his own purpose. Those who loved God are those who have been "summoned by preference."[40]

The rest of humanity will be "thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:6). In the plan of God, they serve to produce an environment in which the chosen ones may increase in sanctification, and to promote the glory of God by their destruction and damnation. Their lives have no positive meaning for themselves. Many are appalled and outraged at such a God who is sovereign, and who dares to exercise his sovereignty, but "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (Romans 9:21).

[40] Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; North Point Press, 1996; p. 343.

## PRAYER AND THE DIVINE NATURE

In the introduction to the previous section, I mentioned that God is defined by the sum of his attributes. Some of these attributes are his sovereignty, knowledge, and transcendence – or, we may say that God is all-powerful, God is all-knowing, and God is spirit. Stephen Charnock is credited as having said, "It is impossible to honor God as we ought, unless we know him as he is."[41] Accordingly, there is an intimate relationship between prayer and the divine attributes; the former is impossible without knowledge of the latter.

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

Likewise, many people pray to "God," but if they were to describe him, what we hear may not correspond at all to the biblical God. If this person's "God" is completely irreconcilable with the Bible, can we say that he is praying to God, and can we say that this person is a Christian? The Israelites pointed to the golden calf that they had made and declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). But God himself disagreed.

If your "God" is a "golden calf," then you are not a Christian. From the biblical perspective, you are an idol worshiper. Of course, you can say that you are a Christian – anyone can say that – but you are not one by biblical definition. And if your definition of "Jesus" is too far off, then you are not a Christian even if you define "God" in terms of the biblical divine attributes.

Therefore, let no one say that theology is unimportant or impractical – it is the most important factor in the Christian life and the necessary foundation for the "practical" issues to be intelligible. Besides its inherent value, theology is the prerequisite for all spiritual activities, including prayer. People say that if you want to know God, then you should pray. No! If you do not know something about God *first*, then you *cannot* pray. If you do not have at least a minimal but biblical conception of God,[42] then you may just be praying to an entity produced by your own imagination instead of the true God, which is idolatry. Thus if you want to know God, study the Scripture, then pray to this God that it teaches you about.

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[41] Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*; Baker Books, 2000 (original: 1853).

[42] One should at least know enough about God so as to able to distinguish the Christian God from all other gods and religions. If one is able to reconcile the Christian God (or Christianity as a whole) with that of any other religion or worldview, then he does not know enough about God. Of course, one will never know enough about God in the sense that he may stop learning.

As Christians, we may know something about the divine attributes, but we do not always pray as if these attributes are true of God. Christians who dare not explicitly deny the attributes of God nevertheless often implicitly deny them when they pray. We must correct this, or our prayers will not please God and glorify him as much as they should. For example, God's omniscience has a number of implications for prayer, and we must pray "as if" God is omniscient, because he really is. Imagine a prayer whose content assumes or implies that God is powerless, ignorant, and local. Such a prayer insults God rather than glorifies him.

We will be discussing three divine attributes and their implications for prayer, but you must make the effort to learn more about God. As you learn more about him, you should consider the implications that this new knowledge has on your prayers, and thus make your prayers increasingly consistent with the way God is as revealed in Scripture.

## 4. PRAYER AND SOVEREIGNTY

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

Some Christian ministers are fond of affirming the proposition, "God needs you," in one form or another. The immediate context may be an exhortation to greater dedication in prayer, evangelism, helping the needy, giving money to the church, or some other activity that would advance the kingdom of God. Although some of these ministers mean what they say literally, perhaps not all of them do, and certainly not all of them intend all that is implied when we say that God needs us. Nevertheless, the proposition is so unbiblical, and the implications so blasphemous, that we should stop saying that God needs us in all settings and contexts, and in whatever form the proposition may take.

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

It is often to motivate their congregations that ministers say God needs them. The assumption is that the commands of God appear to be more meaningful if God actually needs these people to help him. But when we think this way, we are thinking of God as if he is a finite being, and so we are no longer thinking about the Christian God, nor are we thinking as Christians. Of course we should obey the commands of God, but we should not sustain our motivation for doing so with the idea that he needs us to obey them or his plans would somehow fail.

Since God commands us to pray, negligence in prayer is sinful. However, it does not mean that our failure to pray will hinder the plan of God. He does not need our prayers. Neither has he bound himself to a certain way of interacting with his creation, so that he will or can only act when certain conditions are met on the human side. Some have gone as far as to say that God has given dominion to man, so that God will or can only intervene if man grants "permission" for God to do so. This is plainly false. The Bible testifies that God controls all things, including the thinking and behavior of demons and humans. He sends even evil spirits to do his bidding, and he gives to or takes from his creatures whatever he pleases, whenever and however he pleases.

God possesses absolute sovereignty. This means that he determines all things, and he carries out what he has determined by his omnipotence. But he chooses to use means to accomplish his ends, and his means often involve human beings and their prayers.

Nevertheless, he has not bound himself to use these means or any means at all in accomplishing his plans. In addition, the means by which he accomplishes his ends do not work autonomously, but they are themselves determined by his sovereignty, so that nothing in creation escapes his attention and control.

It follows that the proposition, "Prayer changes things," is false. Prayer does not change anything. It is God as a person who exercises his omnipotence to change things, and not the human act of prayer that changes them. Also, prayer does not change God, since he is immutable in all his attributes and decrees, and he has determined in eternity all that he will do.

Some passages appear to say that our prayers can change God's mind – until we examine them more carefully. For example, after the people of Israel had sinned by making and worshiping the golden calf, God says to Moses, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). But after hearing the intercession of Moses (v. 11-13), verse 14 says, "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." Therefore, on the surface it appears that God changed his mind in response to the prayer of Moses.

However, the above interpretation contradicts the following two verses on the subject: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19); "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." (1 Samuel 15:29). Since these two verses explicitly state that God does not change his mind, we must conclude that the above interpretation saying that God does change his mind must be false, even without further argument.

Nevertheless, for the sake of confirmation, we may directly deal with the passage from Exodus, and show we can arrive at the same conclusion, that God does not change his mind after all. Now, Jacob says in Genesis 49:10, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his." This is understood as predicting the lineage of the Messiah, finding its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Exodus 32:10 has God saying that he would destroy the Israelites and raise up a new nation through Moses. But Moses was a Levi, which means that God had never planned to raise up a new nation through Moses, and only several verses later, it turned out that he did not have to.[43] W. Bingham Hunter is thus correct when he says, "My conviction is that references to God's 'repenting,' 'relenting' or 'changing his mind' in Scripture are

[43] However, it does not follow that God lied to Moses in Exodus 32:10, since if Moses had not interceded, God could have indeed carried out his pronouncement against the Israelites and destroyed them all. But that Jacob had already said what he said in Genesis 49:10 meant that there was no possibility that God would have carried out Exodus 32:10; therefore, unless God had chosen some other way to prevent carrying out Exodus 32:10, he had already determined that Moses would intercede, and there was no possibility that Moses would not have done it.

figures of speech; technically speaking, they are anthropopathisms – expressions which explain God in terms usually used to describe human emotions."[44]

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

Many people's idea of prayer amounts to thinking that, "In prayer a human being seeks to assert self-will over the will of God."[45] Stanley Grenz observes, "Some Christians fail to see this conflict as in any way problematic. They readily admit adhering to exactly this understanding of prayer. Certain evangelical and charismatic circles describe prayer as a technique for bending the divine will."[46] To the extent that one's idea of prayer resembles this description, he has altogether misunderstood the nature of God, Christianity, and prayer. We must completely abandon and clear away from our minds the idea that prayer is "for bending the divine will." The divine will cannot be bent, and it cannot be changed; our idea of prayer must correspond to this reality. Prayer is meaningful because "God has decided to include humans in the divine program for the world,"[47] and not because he needs our permission or request to act.

Therefore, we must define prayer not as changing the will of God, but we must think about it from another perspective. A more biblical view of prayer is to think of it as one possible means in the process by which God gives us what he wants, or achieves some other purpose of his. This may include his plan to grant us some material goods, or it is part of the process that effects our sanctification.

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

Failing to observe this, some have derived principles and definitions on prayer that they find meaningful, but by the time they are done, there is no room left for the Christian God in their theology of prayer, so that they have the "prayer" that they like, but no God. Such is the case with a view of prayer affirming that God changes his mind in response to our

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

petitions, which fails to note the figurative intent of some passages, and the explicit scriptural statements that contradict their position.

Forming a proper conception of prayer brings us to note the implications of biblical prayer and its relation to divine sovereignty, namely, we must think, speak, and pray "as if" God is sovereign, because he really is sovereign. Divine sovereignty does not threaten the meaningfulness of prayer as long as we do not insist that meaningfulness depends on some weakness or deficiency in God, so that he needs us to pray in order to intervene or accomplish his plans. Rather, prayer is meaningful because it is a chosen means that plays a role in accomplishing the plans of God. Divine sovereignty also implies that there is never a need to assume that all is lost due to a failure to pray, although such failure is a moral problem that we must correct. We should realize that the fate of the universe does not depend on us. For this reason, referring to "the power of prayer" is misleading, since there is no power in prayer itself, but the power is only in God. If we insist on using this phrase because of habit, at least we should be aware of the truth, that the power is in God alone, and that we say such things as "the power of prayer" only as a manner of speaking.

## 5. PRAYER AND OMNISCIENCE

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

God has exhaustive knowledge of all things. He knows all bout our past, present, and future. He knows all of our thoughts and actions. He is omniscient. Scripture repeatedly reminds us of this attribute of God, and we must take care not to forget it, or act in a way that is inconsistent with it. That is, if God is omniscient, then we should think and act in a way that reflects our acknowledgment of this divine attribute. In our context, divine omniscience has several implications for how we should pray.

Some people think that God will hear them because their prayers are long and repetitious. In some religions, prayer often consists of monotonous chants or prescribed prayers that are recited again and again without thought. On the basis of God's omniscience, Jesus condemns such prayers. He tells us not to be like these pagans because God already knows what we need before we ask him.

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

I am not sure how long she prayed, but I think it must have been twenty minutes. In a setting where the primary function of the conference is discussion, the prayers should be brief, perhaps limited to one minute or so. In this case, her prayer could have been said in ten to thirty seconds. No public prayer should last twenty minutes unless there is some sort of a prior agreement, and even then I hesitate to give my approval to it, since given the way people pray nowadays, it would just be twenty minutes of wasted time. But if we are assured that the entire prayer will consist of meaningful content without needless repetition or other stupid behavior, then perhaps an even longer prayer is justified at times.

If I were to think better of the woman than what her behavior suggested, I would say that she had formed some poor prayer habits. But in this case, it was evident that she wanted to dominate the conference, and to get the attention and approval of other participants. She wanted to show the rest of us her spirituality and passion for the things of God, which her lengthy prayer in fact suggests to be false. She succeeded in annoying me and nothing more. But if she had gained the admiration of the other women that night,

according to Jesus, that is all the reward she was going to get. She did not impress God at all.

I was not the leader or moderator of the conference call, but if I had been responsible for it, I would have spoken to her after the first instance of such violation and point out to her from the Bible that her behavior was wrong. If she had continued, I would have to embarrass her by addressing it on the conference call itself. If she had insisted on continuing such behavior, I would have to forbid her from participating again. This treatment follows the general pattern for church discipline outlined in the Bible.

Maybe you also pray like this woman. If so, stop it! You are not spiritual, and you do not know God. You are praying as the pagans do. You are treating God as the pagans treat their deities, who are not gods at all. All the reward you are going to get is the admiration of unknowledgeable people who would be fooled by your false piety. The more spiritual and mature believers would be disgusted by the shameful display that you call prayer. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." Of course, God welcomes his people, and you may pray as long as you wish if you continue to have something meaningful to say. But leave out the nonsense.[48]

Christians should pray "as if" God is omniscient because God is indeed omniscient. This is the principle that we must keep in mind, that we must reflect our belief in the divine attributes in all that we think and do. God already knows our thoughts, desires, and circumstances; therefore, when we pray, we do not need to repeat ourselves in chant-like fashion or make the prayer as long as possible and keep on going even if we have already finished presenting our petition. There is no need to provide a very detailed description of the circumstances surrounding the situation, or give elaborate arguments on why God should grant a particular request. He already knows the situation thoroughly.

There is a popular teaching that we should always be specific in our prayers. Instead of asking God for wisdom, we should ask him to enlighten us on the subject that we wish to understand. Instead of asking him to provide, we should ask him to give us a certain amount of money. Instead of asking for a spouse in general, we should specify the exact characteristics that we wish him or her to have.

However, this teaching appears to be unbiblical, especially when one insists that all prayers must be specific, and that the level of specificity must be very high. Some of the prayers in the Bible are specific, but many are very general, even when they are directed toward clear and specific needs. In any case, the number of highly specific prayers in the Bible does not justify the teaching that we should make most or all of our petitions highly specific.

This is not to say that most or all of our prayers should be general. I merely want to point out that it is unbiblical to insist that most or all prayers should be specific, since the Bible

[48] Jesus commands us to be persistent in prayer, but the woman in our example does not demonstrate persistence, but false piety.

does not provide justification for this teaching. In fact, given the omniscience of God, our starting assumption should be that most prayers do not need to be highly specific or contain many details. Although I do recommend that one be specific when confessing his sins, I can think of at least several biblical passages in which even prayers of such a nature are not very specific.

Some people argue that making our requests specific has the positive effect of focusing our minds when we pray. This may be true, but we are not praying to ourselves. In prayer, we are not trying to achieve mystical breakthroughs or reach an altered state of consciousness. Rather, we are addressing an intelligent person who simultaneously perceives our words, thoughts, and circumstances. If God is omniscient, then we should not act as if he is not omniscient.

It is also said that if we will make our petitions specific, then we will more easily recognize our answers when they come. However, this is true only if God answers our prayers in the way that we prescribe, but there is nothing in Scripture promising that God will give us what we ask in the exact manner and form that we expect. It may be that he decides to answer our prayers in ways that will further our sanctification, whereas when we prayed we were only concerned with our apparent need and not thinking about our spiritual growth at all. That said, at times, God may move a person to pray a very specific petition so that when the answer comes, the person would be more convinced that the prayer has something to do with it. But again, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that this is the rule rather than the exception.[49]

There is another issue that may pressure a person to make his petitions highly specific. I am not sure how many people have thought of it, but it receives little attention from books on prayer. Moreover, since discussing it will involve a partial but instructive exposition of two relevant passages, the point is indeed worthy of mention. Here are the passages:

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

[49] It has been suggested that when we pray for the sick, we should specify what should happen to the body from the perspective of medical science in order for the condition to be healed. The use of some medical terms is at times recommended. Although proponents of this view do not say that medical knowledge is *necessary*, they claim that medical knowledge will help one to pray for effectively for the sick. This is unbiblical. God knows what he should do to heal any disease or injury; he does not need us to specify all the details. In addition, the medical explanations of people's conditions are often wrong.

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

The context of these parallel passages is prayer, and in them, Jesus gives his hearers three examples illustrating how earthly parents respond to the petitions of their children. On this basis, he makes a "from lesser to greater" argument[50] to establish the superior benevolence of the heavenly Father.

The three examples Jesus gives about earthly parents tell us the point that he intends to establish about the heavenly Father. We may represent these examples by the following propositions:

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

The "stone" probably refers to one of the limestone pebbles of the Palestine seashore that looked like small loaves of bread. The "snake" in the second example may be an eel, which the Jews could not eat because it was considered unclean. As for the scorpion, its claws and tail are folded in when it is at rest, and thus may resemble an egg.[51]

In effect Jesus is saying to his hearers, "You will not give your son something that makes it look like you have granted his request, but in fact it is the means by which you will make his situation worse." From this premise, Jesus argues that God is not like the pagan gods that we read about in mythology, who would use the request of a petitioner as an opportunity to mock and torment him. These mythological deities may make the petitioner's situation worse in the process of granting the request, or by granting the request, they would make his situation worse through the consequences produced by the granted petition.

For example, if a man were to ask for a large sum of money with the intention to cure his wife of a fatal disease, these mythological deities may kill his wife in a car accident so

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

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

that the man may receive the money he wants from her life insurance. But then, the man would no longer need the money. Stanley Grenz gives the following example:

> The goddess of the dawn, Aurora, fell in love with a human youth, Tithonus. When offered by Zeus any gift she might choose for her lover, she requested that Tithonus live forever. Unfortunately, Aurora failed to specify that Tithonus remain forever young. Her request was granted, but in an unfortunate way. Poor Tithonus grew ever older and could never die. The gift of Zeus became a curse.[52]

In my example, the man would need to specify that his request must be fulfilled in a way that will not bring any harm to his wife. But then the deities may decide that the man himself or his son should die in the process of granting the petition. The man may specify that no harm should come to anyone in order for the request to be granted or as the result of the request being granted. But then he fails to specify how long it should take before the money comes, so that he may not get it in time.

In Grenz's example, Aurora could have specified that Tithonus were to remain forever young besides living forever. But then she may have failed to specify that Tithonus should also be immune to sickness, so that the result may be that he could be immortal and young, but forever ill and in torment.

As one who often deals with theology and philosophy, I try to be specific and precise when communicating my views, and I try to anticipate objections or misunderstandings so that I may address them in my presentation. However, even if I were to anticipate all the ways in which my words can be distorted and misunderstood, and even if I were to anticipate all the potential objections to my views, it would be impossible to address all of them in any given presentation. But the fact is that I may indeed fail to anticipate certain objections and distortions, so that I can only address them if they were directed at me after my presentation.

However, the difficulty is nothing compared to the problems that may arise when speaking to God. If God were to behave like the pagan deities, it would be impossible to outwit him by formulating a perfect petition that cannot be distorted or answered in a way that makes things worse. But Jesus assures us that this is not something we need to worry about – God is not like the pagan deities. He is not trying to trick us or mock us. Thus I need not try to cover myself from every possible angle when I bring my request before him. God already knows about my needs, and I can trust him when I speak to him. He will not use my petition as an opportunity to make my situation worse. When I ask for an egg, I do not need that I want a chicken egg of a particular size, of a particular color, from a particular farm, and that I do not want a poisoned or spoiled one.

Therefore, when we pray, we may wish to include some details, and be specific enough to constitute clear communication. But we must also assume the omniscience and

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

benevolence of God, so that we do not need to worry that a prayer that is not highly specific will be unanswered. In fact, the Bible shows that God will often do greater things than we request and expect.

Abraham asked God to spare the cities if there were only five righteous men there, and it was likely that his main concern was saving Lot from destruction. Since there were not even five righteous man in the cities, God was technically justified in destroying them, which he did, but he removed Lot from cities before he destroyed them. Assuming that Abraham's main concern was really Lot's safety, his prayer technically failed, but God knew Abraham's thoughts and granted what he was really after.

In the same way, although it is irreverent to be careless with our words when we pray, we do not need to be perfectly precise and extremely specific. This is not an excuse to be lazy. The biblical prayers are specific enough so that we know a prayer that simply says, "Bless me," is likely to be too general in most contexts. Nevertheless, God always knows what you are going through, so that at times even "Help me!" is sufficient. The point is that it is wrong to pray as if God knows nothing, or as if he is looking for loopholes in our petitions so that he may answer them in ways that will ultimately harm us. If God wants to harm us, he can do so without the opportunity generated by an imperfectly formulated petition.

We should pray in a way that implies our acknowledgment of the divine attributes of God, and here we are emphasizing his omniscience. That God knows everything, even our thoughts, implies that we do not even need to pray aloud, but that he can hear us even when we pray to him in our minds without speaking out our prayers. There are several examples in the Bible where prayers to God were made only in the mind, and they were answered (Genesis 24:45; 1 Samuel 1:13).

Nevertheless, there are advantages to praying aloud. Although I have argued above that our prayers do not need to be extremely specific, they should not be so general that even we have no idea what we are saying to God. Speaking out our prayers forces us to put our thoughts into words, and therefore helps to focus our minds when addressing God. For this reason, you should usually pray using clear and distinct words even when you are praying only in your mind. That is, you may "speak" those words to God in your mind without saying them aloud with your mouth, and he will hear you.

Another reason for praying aloud is so that others may be edified. We are not saying that we should pray aloud so that others may hear us in order to impress them. Jesus condemns such a motive for prayer. What I am pointing out is that our prayers, although addressed to God, may also be a source of comfort and instruction for other people (John 11:41-42). When others hear how expectant and reverent we are when we pray, it may encourage them to pray likewise. And since any prayer presupposes a theology, our prayers will have the effect of informing and encouraging others if they are rich in theological content, as with the prayers of Paul in his letters. Praying aloud is also necessary when we are in public gatherings and when we are praying in agreement with other people.

Whatever we do, the principle remains that we are to avoid being hypocritical and self-serving in our motives and in our prayers. And we are to keep in mind that God is omniscient when we pray.

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

The above fails to grasp the purpose of prayer. If the purpose of prayer is to inform God of our needs, desires, and circumstances, then it is indeed unnecessary and irrelevant, since God already knows all these things. But the purpose of prayer is not to give him information that he does not already have.

First, we must pray because God commands us to pray. If we do not get any additional explanation, this is sufficient reason to pray.

Second, prayer is meaningful because it is the means by which God brings his executes his plans. W. Bingham Hunter says, "I passionately disagree with the notion that prayer is a way to get from God what we want."[53] Instead, he offers the following definition: "Prayer is a means God uses to give us what he wants."[54] That is, prayer is only one step in the process by which God executes his plans for his creation, and even our prayers are sovereignly caused by him. Therefore, prayer accords with both his comprehensive sovereignty and knowledge.

Third, we should pray because prayer is not only about getting things from God, but it is a means by which we grow in our sanctification. The Bible tells us that the will of God is our sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7). The things that God commands us to do and the things that God causes to occur in our lives all contribute to the purpose of our sanctification in Christ. In prayer we struggle against temptations, distractions, lusts, and unbelief. We struggle to find words to express our needs and desires. We study diligently to refine our prayers so that they may be more pleasing to God. But if we see prayer only as the means by which we attain what we need for self-preservation or self-gratification, then we will fail to see all the activities and benefits related to prayer that contribute to our spiritual growth. When we learn to see prayer from the broader perspective, that it is a means to meet our needs as well as one that contributes to our sanctification, we will understand that although God knows and determines all things, there is no conflict between his attributes and our need to remain in the habit of prayer and worship.

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[53] Hunter, *God Who Hears*; p. 12.

[54] Ibid., p. 12 and 199. This definition may be too narrow when applied to prayer in general, but it is correct insofar as it intends to describe the meaning and relevance of petitions to God.

## 6. PRAYER AND TRANSCENDENCE

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

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

That God is omnipresent does not mean that he occupies all of physical space, at least not in the sense that we occupy physical space. Since "God is spirit" and not matter, he occupies none of physical space at all. God says in Jeremiah 23:24, "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" Now, if he fills his creation in terms of its physical space, then nothing else can exist as physical matter or occupy physical space, since we would not be able to occupy the same physical space as God. Omnipresence means, not that God fills all of physical space, but that he knows and controls all of his creation, including all of physical space, so that the same verse from Jeremiah emphasizes, "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" In this very real sense, God is everywhere, and there is nowhere that you can go in creation where there is no God, or where his knowledge and power does not extend. This chapter explores some of the tremendous implications that this divine attribute has on prayer.

Leading up to our text on the spiritual nature of God and the nature of true worship is a point brought up by a Samaritan woman: "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). By "this mountain," the woman means Mount Gerizim, and she is referring to the debate between the Jews and the Samaritans about the proper place of worship. Jesus answers that true worship is not to be identified with location, but with whether the person is worshiping "in spirit and in truth." Jesus appeals to the spiritual nature of God as the basis of this reply.

Failing to understand the spiritual and transcendent nature of God, the enemies of Israel says in 1 Kings 20:23, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they." They thought God was local. Those who understood the true nature of God knew better, so that even as Solomon dedicates the Jewish temple, he exclaims, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). He knew that a transcendent God does not "live" in a physical temple. Although the form of worship that the people of God assumed during

this period of redemptive history included the use of a physical temple, those who had understanding knew that God was not local.

The coming of Christ signified that what the Old Covenant anticipated was about to be fulfilled. Kenneth Wuest's comments on Romans 12:1 are very applicable at this point: "This is in contrast to the worship of the priests which consisted of outward forms, symbolic in themselves of spiritual truth, and yet not rational in the sense that this worship was not devoid of a material connection….Israel preached the gospel through the use of object lessons, the tabernacle, priesthood, and offerings. The Church preaches the same gospel in abstract terms."[55]

Old Covenant worship was indeed founded upon intellectual truth, but much was associated with and implied by outward expressions and rituals. Christ's fulfillment of the Old Covenant and inauguration of the New Covenant signaled the dawn of a new era in which the people of God are free to worship him as spirit to spirit, mind to mind, intellect to intellect. True and acceptable worship is now independent of our location, and much less associated with physical expressions and rituals;[56] rather, the emphasis rightly returns to sincerity and truth, to motive and doctrine.

Daniel was a pious man. Most Christians today cannot claim to approach his spiritual devotion, extraordinary character, and intellectual prowess. How many of us can claim to be "ten times" greater than the intellectual elite of our day "in *every* matter of wisdom and understanding" (Daniel 1:20)? More than a few theologians of our day insist that the Hebrews favor "practical" wisdom over theoretical or academic wisdom. This is not true. At least with Daniel and his friends, there is no doubt that the emphasis is placed on their "book smarts,"[57] since verse 17 says, "To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of *literature* and *learning*."[58] Of course, this does not contradict or undermine any supernatural endowment God chose to give them: "And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (v. 17). For our purpose, the point is that Daniel was an all-around superior specimen of a believer.

Nevertheless, when Daniel prayed, he went to a room where "the windows opened toward Jerusalem" (6:10). Now, those who had understanding knew that this was unnecessary, and Daniel probably did not always prayed this way. Daniel was not wrong

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[55] Kenneth S. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955.

[56] Worship is not completely independent of the physical. For example, our bodies form the "temple" of God (1 Corinthians 6:19), and we still have the rituals of baptism and communion. Nevertheless, the significance of all three hinges upon the relationship of our intellect to revelation, that is, the relationship of our mind to Scripture.

[57] Any so-called "practical" wisdom must have as its foundation an intellectual understanding of Scripture. What many Christians consider practical wisdom is nothing more than *convenient* but worldly and unbiblical ways of doing things that are without biblical foundation. But I reject the distinction between the theoretical and the practical in the first place. "Practical" wisdom is only theoretical wisdom *about* what we consider "practical" things. Otherwise, it is not "wisdom" at all, but just an unexamined habit or instinct. If it is "wisdom," then it is intellectual, academic, and theoretical.

[58] Their abilities were tested against the "scribes" (v. 20) of the day. "Magicians" is perhaps a misleading translation. See *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, by Robert Young.

in doing this under the Old Covenant, but under the New Covenant, it would be meaningless to do what he did. In fact, the only meaning conveyed by praying toward Jerusalem today would be a denial of the work of Christ. God is not bound to any point in space, or even especially associated with any point in space. Jerusalem is not an especially holy place today, and there is no such thing as a "holy land" from the Christian perspective.

Pilgrimage to a certain geographical area is unnecessary, and betrays not only a lack of understanding, but also a shirking of real spiritual duty, which pertains more to things like doctrine, prayer, and good works. So what if you travel to the empty tomb where Jesus occupied? Why would you feel "closer" to him? Jesus is no longer there; he left that place two thousand years ago. Now, perhaps visiting some of the biblical sites may excite you about the biblical narratives you have already read, and because of this you feel closer to God. But feeling is deceptive, and any real intimacy comes from thinking about the words that you have already read from Scripture, and you can do that at home. The Bible says that only those who believe the truth and obey his commands are close to God.

Any real benefit that you may receive from visiting these sites occurs only because they remind you of what you have already read from the Bible, which brings us back to the point that true spirituality depends on the intellect and its relationship with revealed truth; it has nothing to do with your location. But since these benefits occur only in the mind, you can receive them by reading your Bible wherever you are, only that the benefits will be greater, since you are spending more time reading and thinking, rather than sight-seeing, and trying to convince yourself that you are getting closer to God by doing so. My point is that you must not treat God as if he is local; God is spirit, and you must treat him as such by worshiping him in spirit and in truth, and not by going to Jerusalem. You are also spirit, created in his image, and therefore you can associate with him by interacting with the words of the Bible, which is his revelation to you.

One of my classmates in high school was a Muslim. He had a prayer carpet with a compass sewn into it so that he could face the direction of Mecca when he prayed. Muslims are very concerned with Mecca; their faith is entwined with this place. Thus Robert Morey wisely suggests that the United States should threaten to destroy Mecca in order to deter the Muslim terrorists.[59]

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

The Catholics take care to secure the "bread and wine" of communion, lest they spill the body and blood of Christ! Even some who call themselves Christians act as if the Bible

[59] Robert Morey, *Winning the War Against Radical Islam*; Christian Scholars Press, 2002.

itself – that is, the physical object consisting of paper and ink – is especially holy, and some act as if the crucifix has special powers. But the power of God is not tied to these physical objects, and the power of the Bible is in its words, not the physical book itself. We appropriate the power of the "Bible," not by physically wielding it, but by reading it and believing its doctrines. The Christian must repudiate the sort of practices and superstitions found in Islam, Buddhism, and Catholicism. We worship God "in spirit and in truth," and not by facing a certain direction or by kissing a book.

You approach God by knowledge and by faith, not by physical technique or posture. Prayer is not better when you do it in a church, or when you are in Jerusalem, but you must pray "in spirit and in truth." If you are in ignorance or in unbelief when it comes to biblical doctrines, or if you praise God with your lips while your heart is far from him, then you will not be heard, and you are not close to God even if you are face to face with Christ.

It follows from God's transcendence that we can pray anywhere and at anytime. You can even pray with your mind and God will hear you, for even before Psalm 139 mentions his omnipresence, it says, "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (v. 1-4). The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre could not stand the idea of Someone constantly "staring" at him, and who is aware of all that he thinks and does, and thus he *needed* to be an atheist. Now, although the divine attributes may produce in Christians a holy fear, they also bring invincible peace and comfort, and we would have it no other way.

## PRAYER AND THE MORAL LIFE

W. Bingham Hunter writes, "From a biblical point of view, prayer is related to everything that we are and everything that God is. God does *not* respond to our prayers. God responds to *us*: to our whole life….Our all-knowing God responds to our entire lives, of which our prayers are merely a small part. This means that how you and I live when we are not praying and worshiping is as significant – perhaps more so – than when we do."[60]

This being the case, in thinking about prayer, it would be a mistake to place the emphasis on the very act of prayer, or any technique associated with it. A discussion on the believer's moral life will prove to be pertinent and helpful to his prayer life even if we do not directly relate the two. Nevertheless, since this is a book about prayer, we will examine several points about the moral life, and relate it to the prayer life.

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

## 7. PRAYER AND MOTIVATION

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

The effect of sin in man is so strong that he can often make the most sacred activities into expressions of his wickedness. He can do something that appears to be very spiritual from a very unspiritual motive. For example, a person who prayer long and often may appear to us as very spiritual and devoted, but this is not necessarily true, since he may be praying precisely to make us think this about him. Sin has made the heart of man so vile that he may even give his life to make himself look good to others, and thus Paul writes that he is possible for a person to suffer martyrdom without any love in his heart. Surely some people willingly endure persecution just for the glory of it.

Many people display strong emotions when they pray or sing at church. Although some of them are probably sincere, many of them are not. Their emotions do not result from an intense gratitude toward the grace of God, but from their self-pity or the desire to cause others to think that they are spiritual. For similarly illegitimate reasons, other people dance and scream at church, perhaps to demonstrate to any observers their spiritual freedom and love for God. They are trying to show that they love God so much that they do not care what other people think about them; however, they do what they do precisely because they care very much about what other people think.

Preaching the true gospel includes a declaration of the sovereignty of God and the cost of discipleship. For the most part, the church today preaches a false gospel that hides or even denies these two crucial elements. Because of this, many false converts have been introduced to the church community so that I would go as far as to say that most people who call themselves Christians today are not true Christians. Since people who are not true Christians cannot worship God in spirit and in truth, there is very little true worship in our public gatherings today. It is easy to throw a rock concert and call it a worship service, and it is easy to think that if we feel good about something, then it must be acceptable to God. Some churches think that true worship includes rolling on the floor and foaming at the mouth. But only the Bible can show us what is true worship.

If God has truly regenerated you, then your faith is real and at the root of your personality is the desire to offer true worship. But since your sanctification is incomplete, you still continue to commit sins, and therefore you must consider the possibility that you do not always worship God with complete purity and sincerity. That is, although at the root of your personality you indeed love God, and you indeed offer him true worship to some

extent, you do not always love or worship him in complete purity and sincerity. Rather, you continue to love and worship him imperfectly, and with ulterior motives.

Jesus says that the first and greatest commandment is for us to love God with our all, and there are people who really think that this is what they are doing. However, they fail to realize what this commandment really means. You may feel very loving toward God, but that is not at all an indication of how much you love him. Jesus says that if you love him, you would obey his commandments. Thus if you love him perfectly, would you not obey his commandments perfectly? If you indeed love God with all of your heart, then you would be perfect, and you would never sin. But the apostle John tells us that if we say that we have no sin, then the truth is not in us. If we admit that we continue to sin, then we have also admitted that we do not love God perfectly.

Also, it is impossible for most people to love God very much at all, not to say perfectly, because of their ignorance of theology. If you know next to nothing about God, then you cannot love him, since your love is either directed toward nothing, or to a false conception of God. Whether you have no conception of God or a false conception of God, the object of your love is not God, and whatever you think you love so intensely is not God, but a product of your imagination and false theology. In fact, unless you are among the elect, the more you find out about God, the more you may hate him. Only the elect can love a God who has absolute sovereignty and exhaustive knowledge, who does whatever he pleases, justifies the elect, and condemns the reprobates.

There is a common misunderstanding that if God gives you a command, then you are surely able to obey it. However, a command of God serves only to define sin, that it would be sinful for you to disobey it, but it says nothing about whether you will be able to obey it. Jesus says that the first and greatest commandment is for us to love God with our all, but no one is able to obey it. No one loves God perfectly, and anyone who claims to be doing it has only succeeded in showing us his very low definition of what perfection means.

Now, that we are unable to obey God perfectly when God demands perfection means that, if we were to be acceptable to God, we will need a foreign righteousness imputed to us – we will need God's own perfect righteousness credited to our account. This is what Christ has done for his own people. If God has chosen you to be saved, it means that Christ came to die for you, and that he has paid your debt incurred by sin, and that when you believed in Christ, his righteousness was imputed to you. God then pronounced you as legally justified in his sight, although in yourself you are still a sinner. It is on this imputed righteousness that you depend both at your justification, and your continual acceptance before God in your Christian life.

That said, this does not mean that you may give up on fighting against sin. The believer is not in the same position as the unbeliever, in that God has given the believer the Holy Spirit, who assists the believer in sanctification. The Holy Spirit causes the Christian to remember and obey the commands of God. Therefore, once you realize that your motives in prayer and worship are not always pure, you may proceed to actively fight against the

sin that lingers. You must struggle to remove the remnants of sinfulness and wickedness in your heart. You must stifle and frustrate the desire for praise and approval from people.

I am trying to show you that your motives in public worship may not be entirely pure, and this applies not only to worship, but also to any context in which you have the opportunity to demonstrate your spirituality in public. Although you have a genuine love toward God if you are truly regenerated, it remains that your love toward him has not yet been perfected.

How should you proceed?

You should practice private prayer and worship. If you are excited about praying when other people are around, but if your enthusiasm becomes almost nonexistent when nobody is watching or praising you, then this is evidence that you have the type of spiritual problem we are talking about above. Your love for God alone should be able to sustain your habit of prayer and study. Jesus says that if you perform spiritual activities in order to gain the approval of other people, then that is all the reward you are going to get. But if you are willing to sincerely offer prayer and worship to God in private, then he will hear you and reward you.

Even when you are in church gatherings and other public settings, there are a number of things that you can do to stifle and frustrate your sinful desire to gain the attention and approval of other people. In general, you should keep a low profile when possible, and avoid drawing attention to yourself by your outward appearance and behavior. This includes dressing, praying, singing, and doing other things in ways that would not make you stand out. If you have been having problems in this area, this might be painful at first. But it is a wicked thing to use a church gathering as a contest to see who appears to be the most spiritual and in love with the Lord. You may even ask a friend to point out ways through which you attract unnecessary attention to yourself.

Of course, at times you may have to do things that may attract some attention to yourself, but are necessary to edify the church. For example, the preacher has to stand up and speak, and the ushers have to walk around the meeting place. These functional activities are approved by Scripture, acknowledged by the church, and performed by appointed individuals, so do not use this as an excuse and think that whatever you do to attract attention to yourself is necessary for the edification to others.

Some people claim that we should allow the Holy Spirit the "freedom" to control how we behave at church. If the Spirit moves them to sing and dance and to roll on the floor, who are they to resist? But the apostle Paul insists that we retain control over our faculties in church: "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). Those who disagree oppose apostolic authority (v. 37) and are subject to church discipline.

Stifling and frustrating the desire for human approval instead of divine approval is not only the responsibility of the individual, but it is also the responsibility of the church community. Too often we do things that encourage sinful motives and hypocritical behavior. For example, we may tend to admire and praise superficial displays of excitement rather than true character and devotion. One reason for this is because genuine virtue is more difficult to detect, since we cannot see into the hearts of men. But we can certainly withhold compliments toward people's outward behavior when we are uncertain that their thoughts and motives correspond. Expressing our appreciation for a truly spiritual person is one thing, flattery is another.

Ignorant and irresponsible ministers make the mistake of encouraging outward "freedom" and unrestrained expression in prayer and worship without reprimanding the false motives of the people in their congregations. Ministers must preach against superficial spirituality and expose the pretenders. They must urge believers to seek only God's approval and to pursue private prayer and worship. In cases of severe abuse and blatant disobedience, the leaders must exercise church discipline to discourage future disorderly behavior.

We must not underestimate human sinfulness, whether in ourselves or in others. Even in private prayer and worship there is room for hypocrisy and false motives. Self-approval and self-congratulation is a common sin. Thus we must learn the habit of self-examination and self-confrontation. We must confront sin in our own hearts with constant vigilance and ruthlessness. Jesus talks about a Pharisee who congratulated himself for not being a tax collector, while the tax collector repents to God for his sinfulness. The one who repents is the one who leaves the place of prayer justified (Luke 18:9-14).

## 8. PRAYER AND OBEDIENCE

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

The prevailing theological tendency of our day is against the continual relevance and application of God's law. There is an aversion to measuring and guiding the thoughts and actions of people by the clear and unbending precepts of the Bible. This school of thought is called "antinomianism."[61] This theological error, and indeed major heresy, may be founded on mistaken ideas about legalism, justification by faith, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

It is easy for antinomianism to gain a following because humanity is born antinomian; people are born rebellious and hostile to the law of God. As Paul writes, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:6-7). The sinful mind rebels against God's law, but the spiritual mind submits to it. Since only the regenerate are "controlled by the Spirit," only believers can submit to the law of God. This means that to the extent we can know one's relationship with God's law, we can also draw some conclusions about his spiritual condition.

The law of God divides humanity into two groups – the righteous and the wicked. Since the fall of Adam, all of humanity is wicked by birth. By their inherited guilt, they are in legal violation against the law of God, and by their subsequent sins, they are in personal violation against the law of God. But having determined that all of humanity would become wicked through Adam, God by his grace chose some out of humanity to become righteous through Christ. Human history subsequently exhibits the continual conflict between the seed of God and the seed of Satan: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

This conflict reached a high point in the work of Christ, who decisively crushed the kingdom of Satan. Thus it is naïve and unbiblical to think that religion is about the unity of mankind, since biblical revelation shows that it is about the dichotomy of these two groups, and unity is desirable only among believers.[62] This point is crucial to a biblical philosophy of history, and runs counter to the interpretation of human events preferred by many people. Thus God makes a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the light and the darkness, the Christians and the non-Christians:

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[61] Greek: *anti* = against; *nomos* = law. As with many heresies, there are various versions of and foundations for antinomianism.

[62] Thus the division and enmity between these two groups is a result of an act of grace; all of humanity would be "united" in wickedness if God had not chosen some for salvation.

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

Accordingly, God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked when it comes to prayer. Proverbs 15:8 says, "The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him." People pray in earnestness when a special need arises or when a tragedy happens; yet, some of these same people would deny being religious at all, let alone being Christians. Thus of course they have no interest in consciously learning and obeying the commands of God in their daily lives. In light of what we have established above, the prayers of these individuals are unacceptable to God, and more than that, they are detestable to him.

Jesus says in John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." This seems to be a big "if." Who are those who remain in Christ and have his words remain in them? Only Christians – not all those who *call* themselves Christians, but real Christians, that is, those who have been changed by the power of God, who have received the Holy Spirit, enabling them to obey the commands of God. This narrows down those who fit the description of this verse to very few people. Perhaps we should do what I suggest so often, that we should emphasize theology more than activities like prayer, since without the first, the second is meaningless. Many times, preachers who emphasize prayer first is just giving unbelievers the false assurance that their prayers are acceptable to God, when they are not even saved.

So, what does it mean to "remain" or "abide" in Christ?[63]

I have heard several fanciful theories about this, including ones that take a rather romantic view toward Christianity. False interpretations and inferences from our relationship to Christ as "branches" are to the "vine" (v. 1-6) encourage the tendency to see our life and abidance in Christ in mystical terms. They tend to portray the unity implied as an ontological oneness, and fail to notice the emphasis on the intellect and obedience by the mention of "words" (v. 3, 7, 10, 11). Accordingly, these false interpretations result in promoting prayer, singing, and other activities as means to abide in Christ. But verse 7 states that answered prayer is the *result* of abiding in Christ.

The writings of John explicitly define what it means to abide in Christ. Verse 10 says, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's

[63] Other translations have "abide" instead of "remain" (see KJV, NASB).

commands and remain in his love." In his first general letter, John writes, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him….Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them" (1 John 3:21-22, 24).

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

You may have heard that, "Christianity is not about following a set of rules." This is true in a sense, but only in a sense, and those who say this often have an unbiblical antinomian outlook. Doubtless Christianity does *not* consist of a set of rules that says, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21), as far as these are "*human* commands and teachings" (v. 22). But how about these: "*Do not* be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. *Do not* be conceited. *Do not* repay anyone evil for evil….*Do not* take revenge, my friends…*Do not* be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:16-21)? Surely the Christian life makes the demand, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but that is only a summary for, "'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and *whatever other commandment* there may be" (Romans 13:9), because "love is the fulfillment of *the law*" (v. 10). That is, to walk in love is to do whatever the law commands.

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

Therefore, if by saying, "Christianity is not about following a set of rules," we mean that we are not justified by obeying the laws of God, then this is true. But if we mean that there are no divine laws to follow in the Christian life, then this is false. In fact, believers are regenerated and justified *so that* they may obey the laws and commands of God, so much so that if a person does not exhibit a definite lifestyle of obedience toward biblical commands, he is not a Christian no matter what he says. He can say with great conviction, "Jesus Christ died for my sins and I trust him as my Savior. Jesus is Lord!" This person is not telling the truth; he is not a Christian. Again, a person is not saved by

obedience, but he has not been saved unless he exhibits obedience. Salvation comes only by grace apart from works, but if a person fails to exhibit good works, it means that God has never changed his heart by grace.

You may say, "I thought this is a book about prayer! Aren't you really talking about something else, and just loosely associating it with prayer?" As mentioned in the introduction of this section of the book, it is a mistake to focus on the very act of prayer when discussing the subject. If you understand what I have been trying to convey so far in this chapter, then you should also understand why this is so. You see, according to Jesus, for your prayers to be acceptable, you must first be a Christian – a real Christian who exhibits a lifestyle of obedience – and *then*, you may "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Acceptable prayer depends on who you are, and not just saying the right things when you pray. Therefore, it is best to look at prayer from a broader perspective, relating it to our lifestyle and sanctification. Perhaps now you can better appreciate the words of W. Bingham Hunter, quoted earlier: "From a biblical point of view, prayer is related to everything that we are and everything that God is. God does *not* respond to our prayers. God responds to *us*: to our whole life….Our all-knowing God responds to our entire lives, of which our prayers are merely a small part. This means that how you and I live when we are not praying and worshiping is as significant – perhaps more so – than when we do."[64]

We cannot earn answers to our prayers by our good conduct, since even if we fully obey God, we would not have earned anything: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). God does not owe us anything even when we have perfectly obeyed him, since we owe him perfect obedience in the first place. So I am not saying that we must earn answers to our prayers, but I am saying that we must be *Christians* when we pray, and if you are really a Christian, then you will think and behave like one. Then, you will know that God hears you, having the biblical assurance that "the Father himself loves you" (John 16:27), because he has given you true love for Christ and sincere faith in him.

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

## 9. PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE

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

Once you have prayed to God for or about something, should you pray for it again? The prevailing opinion in some circles is that to repeatedly pray for something is indicative of a lack of faith. Proponents of this position say that if you truly believe that God has heard you or even granted your request when you prayed the first time, then you would not be praying for it again, at least not in the same way. Perhaps you may mention the topic again, but instead of speaking as you did the first time, you should at least change your speech from a form of petition to that of thanksgiving. Instead of asking God for the same thing again, you should thank him that he has already granted your request.

At least on the surface, we may commend these people for their intention. They wish to pray in a way that demonstrate faith in God, and to take care not to insult him by speaking or behaving in a way that suggests doubt. However, although this approach to prayer appears to exhibit faith, is it a result of careful thinking and accurate exegesis, or is it the conclusion of false analogies and faulty interpretation? And if the process of formulation of this doctrine is very inferior, it casts doubt on the purity of their motives as well. I will not direct our attention to the issue of motive in this chapter, but I will show that the Bible does not teach that praying in faith prevents one from asking for the same things more than once, and in fact, the Bible teaches that if we were to pray in faith, we must persist in prayer by repeatedly asking for the same things.

An analogy is sometimes used to illustrate why we should not pray for something more than once. Imagine a child asking his father for something again and again, when the father has already promised to give it to him after the first request. We would judge the child to be untrusting, and his behavior annoying. By repeatedly asking for the same thing when it has already been promised to him, the child insults his father's integrity. Variations of this analogy may replace the father and son relationship with one that is between two friends, but the point remains the same; that is, it is an insult to repeat a petition when the item asked for has already been promised.

The analogy appears to be reasonable as far as human relationships go, but it falls apart when we apply it to God. The analogy does not even fully support the position of those who use it. For example, those who say that we should not pray for something more than once nevertheless say that we may repeatedly thank God for granting us our request after the initial petition. But if the child in the analogy thanks his father over and over again after the initial petition, but before the item materializes, it would have the same irritating and insulting effect as if he repeatedly asks for the same thing. It would appear as if the child distrusts the father's integrity or memory, and thus repeatedly reminds him of his promise. To be consistent, those who say that we should pray for something only once

should also say that we should *not* thank God for granting what we have asked *until* the item materializes.

The analogy fails because God is not a human father, and although there are similarities between the fatherhood of God and the fatherhood of man, the two are not similar at every point, and we must look to Scripture to determine at which points the two are similar, and at which points they are different. Analogies can be very misleading. Only if an analogy comes from Scripture is it authoritative, and illustrates a true similarity between the two. Even then, we must take care to use the analogy to illustrate only the point that it intends to get across, and not some other point that we wish to justify.

We must be careful when constructing analogies to illustrate our relationship with God, lest we forget that God is not human but divine, and therefore he is not like us in many ways. Some mistakenly think that since we call God our "Father," we may treat him almost exactly like how we would treat an ideal human father. But this is a false and dangerous inference. No matter how good an earthly father is, we do not worship him; a person who sings songs of praise to his earthly father to extol his greatness is probably insane. God is not a human being, so we should not treat him like one. Therefore, the analogy about the child making requests to his father fails to establish that we should not repeat our petitions to God.

However, the position that we are considering is not solely based on analogies. Its proponents do try to find biblical support, and here we will examine two representative passages:

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

The argument is that these verses tell us that after we have prayed for something, we are to believe that we have already received what we prayed for, and then we are to talk and act in a way that is consistent with this belief. To talk and act like we have already received implies that we should not pray for what we have asked again. Therefore, we should not repeat our petitions to God; otherwise, it would indicate that we do not really believe that we have already received, which is a lack of faith.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the interpretation of these verses is correct, that is, they teach us that once we have prayed for something, we are supposed to believe that we have already received it. However, the verses do not explicitly tell us how we are supposed to act once we believe that we have received. It may be true that once I believe that my request toward another *human being* is granted, I should not mention the request to him again, but we have shown that analogies based on human relationships do not

necessarily apply to our relationship with God, since God is not a human being. God is to be treated the way he demands to be treated. Therefore, even if their interpretation of some of these biblical passages is correct, those who say that we must not repeat our petitions to God make a jump in logic at this point, saying that if we are to believe that we have already received, then we should not repeat our petitions.

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

Since Elijah was doing all these things at God's command (1 Kings 18:36), he was praying according to God's will. Now, 1 John 5:14-15 says that when we pray according to God's will, we can "know that we have what we asked of him." Therefore, at least according to those who say that we should not repeat our prayers, Elijah should have believed that God had granted his request upon his first prayer for rain. Indeed, we see something that indicates this in 1 Kings 18:41, where Elijah tells King Ahab, "There is the sound of a heavy rain," even *before* he made his first prayer.

But then, why does Elijah even pray the first prayer, if he already "hears" the sound of rain? According to the assumptions of those who say that we should not repeat our prayers, Elijah should not have prayed the first prayer, since he already believed the promise of God to be as good as done even before he prayed. And certainly after the first prayer, he should not have prayed again. However, it turns out that Elijah not only prayed, but he prayed several times for the same thing:

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

This suggests that believing the promises of God so strongly that we perceive it to be as good as done can accommodate not only the first prayer, but repeated prayers as well. That is, even when one believes that his request is already granted (1 Kings 18:41), even when he believes that he has already received, he may still pray – not once, twice, or five times, but until the answer materializes. But according to those who say that we should

not repeat our prayers, if we really believe that we have received, then we should not repeat our requests. In the light of this example from Elijah, this position is clearly unbiblical, but it is an unwarranted inference about our relationship with God from how human relationships usually work.

Whatever Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was, he says, "*Three times* I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:8), and it appears that he could have continued to repeat his petition if the answer had not come. But since God gave him a reply (v. 9), he could stop praying. Then, in Luke 11:5-8, Jesus gives the following illustration:

> Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and from inside he shall answer and say, "Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet *because of his persistence* he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (NASB)[65]

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

The crucial question is what it means to have faith when we pray. Indeed, James writes, "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). So it is agreed that we must have faith, but those who say that we should not repeat our prayers jump without warrant from this premise, that we must have faith, to the conclusion that we must not repeat our prayers after the first petition.

We should let the Bible define faith, instead of letting extra-biblical analogies from human relationships or unwarranted inferences from biblical passages to define it. In Luke 18, Jesus gives a parable that will help us define faith in its relation to our current discussion on persistence:

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[65] Alternate translations to "persistence" may be "boldness" or "shamelessness," but these do not affect our point here, since the intent of the passage as an encouragement to persistent prayer remains. Indeed, the kind of persistence we are speaking of here is not easily stifled by embarrassment.

> Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" (Luke 18:1-5)

It seems that the widow in this parable repeats her petition many times – the judge says that she "keeps bothering" him. Again, we must be careful what conclusion we draw from this, so that we will not falsely infer something from this parable about a human relationship and apply it to our relationship with God. Verse 1 gives us the purpose of the passage, that Jesus tells this parable to his disciples "to show them that they should always *pray and not give up*" (v. 1).

Therefore, the fact that the judge in this parable is reluctant to help the widow does not mean that God is likewise reluctant to grant our petitions. Jesus intends the judge to be a *contrast* against what God is like: "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (v. 6-8). That is, if even a reluctant judge will grant a persistent widow her request, how much more will a willing Father grant a persistent believer his petition!

The behavior of the widow is to illustrate the main point, that we should "always pray and not give up," that we should "cry out to him *day and night*." That the judge thinks that the widow "keeps bothering" him means that the type of behavior portrayed here includes constant repetition of the same request, over and over again. Thus verse 1 ("pray and not give up"), verse 5 ("keeps bothering"), and verse 7 ("day and night") all indicate that we should repeat our prayers to God.

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (v. 8). What kind of faith is he looking for in people? Precisely the kind of "faith" that the widow demonstrates in the parable! It is the faith that prays and does not give up; it is the faith that cries out to God day and night; it is the faith that persists in prayer to God. Contrary to those who say that faith excludes repeating our petitions to God, Jesus indicates that to have faith means that we repeat our petitions to God over and over again. This is how the Bible defines faith, and we are not to argue, or to subvert this biblical teaching using false analogies from human relationships or unwarranted inferences from biblical passages. To present our requests to God over and over again means that we continue to believe that he hears us and that it is meaningful to pray, no matter what our circumstances may look like. It is not unbelief to repeat our petitions, but it is unbelief to give up and stop praying.

God arranges our lives so that we must persist in prayer in order to further our spiritual growth and sanctification. This may involve a number of things, such as increasing in knowledge, understanding, and patience. One of the most valuable things that we must do is to affirm a more biblical set of priorities. The following passages show that patience, endurance, character, and such qualities are things that we must value and not despise:

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

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

What is disappointing is that many believers miss the purpose of the above passages by using them as nothing more than excuses for their failures, and for not struggling against their problems. But we are not trying to find excuses – a true Christian really must consider the development of his character and maturity more important than the natural things that he desires.

Another misunderstanding about hardship and endurance is that the very experience of suffering, in and of itself, will further our sanctification. This is not true. Just as sensation and experience themselves cannot provide any intelligible information to the mind, but can only provide the occasions upon which God directly acts on the intellect and conveys

to it intelligible information,[66] neither can suffering *in itself* teach us anything or help our spiritual growth.

Rather, our experiences of suffering can at most provide the occasions upon which we recall, organize, assimilate, accept, and learn to obey the information already revealed to us from Scripture. Since no experience comes with its own interpretation, a proper reaction to experience – that is, one that results in spiritual growth – can only come because we have an understanding of biblical revelation and the ability to relate it to our experience. Knowledge of the relevant biblical propositions can come either before or after the experience, but until one has such knowledge, the experience remains unintelligible, so that nothing can be learned from it.

Failing to understand this very important point, many people consider experience or suffering as inherently valuable as the means to teach us spiritual things, and verses such as Hebrews 5:8 may appear to support this: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." But they forget that Jesus had thorough knowledge of Scripture, so that he knew about the progress of God's redemptive plan, his place in this plan, and thus how to interpret his suffering. Experience itself does not bring its own interpretation, and another person could have just as easily developed spiritual rebellion instead of obedience as a result of suffering. In fact, many people do. Even Hebrews 5:8 itself comes to us as a biblical verse and not an experience. The idea that one can learn, in some sense, from his suffering or experience itself has no infallible foundation apart from propositional revelation.

At most, experience stimulates us to think with and about the information that we have already learned through verbal communication, such as from the Bible. Perhaps we will even come to better resolutions about some topics than we have before, but not by any information conveyed by the experience itself, since none is conveyed, but by thinking with and about the biblical propositions that we already know or will learn.

With that in mind, Douglas Kelly's use of Jacob's experience as an explanation on the necessity of persistence in prayer is helpful:

> The name Jacob, prophetically given at birth, means *the Supplanter*, and refers to the fact that he would cheat his older brother out of his birthright. But this same man won the name Israel, *Prince with God*, after wrestling successfully with the Lord. He was a completely changed man after that night….
>
> But it was still a battle and it cost him something. It took him the whole night – he lost a night's sleep. But more than that, in the struggle, the stranger touched his thigh (which was the way of making a personal binding covenant in the ancient world) – so that Jacob was partially lame for the rest of his life.

[66] Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology* and *Ultimate Questions*.

> It was indeed costly for Jacob, but he won the eternal gain. His name was changed that night from Jacob, a constant reminder of his somewhat dishonest character, to Israel, *Prince with God*….Though we experience real pain, we can take courage as we become aware that it is in His love and mercy that He is determined to turn us from a Jacob into an Israel….Not only in Jacob's experience, but also in ours, it takes hard wrestling with ourselves and with the Lord to be turned from self-centered manipulators into princes with God.[67]

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

Experience itself will not teach you any of this – two people going through the same situation often have opposite interpretations of what is happening, and only the Bible can tell us the truth. In fact, God can use the same incident to punish the wicked and edify the righteous, so that there is no inherent meaning in any experience. This very chapter about persistence you are reading is a theological exposition, and not a non-verbal experience. To say it again, only theology – a systematic understanding of biblical revelation – can make sense of prayer and experience, or any aspect of the Christian life. For our suffering and our experience to have any meaning at all, we must be Christians who study and obey the Scripture.

[67] Douglas F. Kelly, *If God Already Knows – Why Pray?*; Christian Focus Publications, 2001 (original: 1989); p. 172-173.

## PRAYER AND THE INNER LIFE

The inner life, or the life of the mind, is foundational to the whole of human existence. Even the moral life must be recognized as first a part of the inner life before we can consider the actions that flow out of it. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19). One first sins in his mind – in his immoral plans, intentions, desires, habits, and reasonings – before he exhibits his sinful determinations and dispositions through the body.

Just as sinfulness begins in one's thoughts, righteousness also has its foundation in the mind. Paul says that the believer's "new self" is "created to be like God *in true righteousness and holiness*" (Ephesians 4:24), but the parallel verse in Colossians 3:10 says that it is "*in knowledge*" that this "new self" is being "renewed…in the image of its Creator." Accordingly, Romans 12:2 says that it is by the "renewing of *your mind*" that you will be "transformed," and gain the ability to discern the will of God, which is good, pleasing, and perfect.[68] This means that if you want to improve your moral life, you must first work on your mind by restructuring it according to biblical precepts.

This is the plain teaching of Scripture, but once I put it in such intellectualistic terms, many people may find it strange and unacceptable. However, this is not because there is anything false in what I say, but it is because what I am saying – that is, what the Scripture teaches – is contrary to the anti-intellectualistic tendency of our culture, and our church culture as well. Indeed, it is not I who chooses to put the teaching of Scripture in such terms, but it is the Scripture itself that does this, and I am merely yielding to it in my exposition.

Once you are able to abandon the anti-intellectual attitude imposed upon you by the culture and accept the way things are as Scripture describes it, then you will find that the Scripture provides clear guidance for directing your spiritual life; it gives you explicit instructions on what to do. Indeed, many believers place great emphasis on the "spiritual life," but the way they use the term either conveys no definite meaning, or even when it does, it appears that they mean a *mystical* life that removes the proper Christian emphasis on the actual content of Scripture. Then, even those who appear to emphasize the actual content of Scripture denies that it is grasped by the intellect, but rather some non-rational (and really non-existent) part of man that they falsely call the "spirit." The truth is that the

[68] Contrary to the emphasis given to the term in some circles, biblical usage of the term, "the will of God," does not only or mainly refer to things like where we should live or which job we should take, but it has a broader meaning that emphasizes the doctrinal and ethical content of Scripture, and its application to our lives.

spirit of man is his rational soul or mind, made in the image of God, and by it we grasp and assimilate the content of Scripture.[69]

The same principle that we have just applied to the believer's moral development also applies to all other aspects of the Christian life, including the prayer life. Just as a strong and meaningful moral life is founded upon an accurate understanding of Scripture, a prayer life that is acceptable in practice and rich in content must have theological understanding as its foundation. Just as moral improvement begins with scriptural instructions, any enhancement of the prayer life begins with an enrichment of the inner life.

We find in Scripture examples of the prayer lives of great men. Jesus could meaningfully pray to his Father all night, and in the letters of Paul are prayers that are rich in inspired theological thinking. If your prayer life is weak, and your prayers are shallow in content, it would help very little to try to remedy the situation by praying even more. In fact, you will probably produce and reinforce bad habits and false theology with such an approach to prayer. Rather, we must improve the prayer life by constructing a better foundation, that is, by building an inner life structured according to biblical precepts.

The first chapter in this section urges you to dethrone experience as a source of information for constructing your spiritual life in general, and your prayer life in particular, since experience can teach us nothing. Then, the next chapter proceeds to outline some elementary directions for building the inner life on the infallible foundation of biblical revelation.

[69] Man does not have a non-rational "spirit." What is called "spirit" in Scripture is the same part of man as his rational mind. Thus man is body (physical) and soul (rational), and not body (physical), soul (rational), and spirit (non-rational).

## 10. PRAYER AND EXPERIENCE

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

Many of the books written on the subject of prayer suggest that the best way to learn about prayer is by actually praying. They say that the best way to learn about prayer (or most other things) is not by talking about it or reading about it, but by doing it. "Learning by doing" is a very popular theory of education, and these books are applying it to the question of how a person should learn to pray. If this theory of learning is correct, then there is limited value in spending hour after hour in trying to construct a biblical theology of prayer; rather, our time is better spent by actually praying. Prayer is best learned by experience.

I disagree. In general, I oppose the theory of learning by doing. In particular, I oppose the idea that anything at all about prayer can be learned by experience.[70]

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

People tell us that we learn how to pray by experience, and that we can learn more about prayer by doing it than by talking about it or reading about it. But where is the biblical justification for such a claim? They want to give the impression that they are giving this advice because they take prayer seriously, and that they want other people to take it seriously as well. But I would say that their advice is sacrilegious – they are treating the presence of God as a place for experimentation rather than a place of worship. If the Bible already gives us many explicit instructions on prayer, then we better *do them* instead of *learn them* during prayer. We abuse God's patience and mercy if we approach him without first learning how to approach him, especially when he has already given us instructions on the matter.

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[70] For an explanation on why I oppose learning by doing, please read my book, *Preach the Word*.

Although God does not always immediately exact judgment upon those who approach him improperly, there are examples in the Old Testament when he struck dead those who failed to follow his instructions for worship. By the principle of trial and error, one could easily become a dead priest before he became an experienced one. Besides insisting that it is impossible to learn anything by experience in the first place, my point is that you should not try to learn from experience what God has already told you by verbal instructions. At the minimum, if you try to learn about prayer by experience, you may end up forming many bad habits and false ideas that may never receive correction. Therefore, we conclude that learning by experience when it comes to prayer is an irreverent and impossible approach.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus did not tell them to learn how to pray by doing it, but he taught them how to pray by giving them verbal instructions. The disciples also mentioned that John the Baptist taught his own disciples how to pray, so we know that those disciples also learned about pray by verbal instructions, and not by experience. Thus we understand that prayer can be taught, and that the way to learn how to pray is not by experience, but by words. That is, the biblical way to learn about prayer is indeed by talking about it and reading about it, not by doing it. Since our topic is prayer, I will not take time to explain, but this principle is also true about other aspects of the spiritual life.

We learn by reading, listening, and thinking, and not by doing. To learn by reading, listening, and thinking makes it at least possible that a person would do something correctly at the first try. But learning by doing, experience, or trial and error inserts the necessity of failure in the very principle of education itself. I have shown somewhere else that even if the sensation one receives really corresponds to the object that produces such a sensation, one must make inferences from such a sensation to produce knowledge, and inferences from sensations are always fallacious.[71] Therefore, any "knowledge" produced from sensation is always false. Thus learning by experience guarantees failure (indeed it depends on it), and it only produces false "knowledge."

For the sake of argument, even if we assume that it is possible to learn from our mistakes,[72] how do you know when you have made a mistake in prayer? Again for the sake of argument, even if we assume that you can catch some of these mistakes by experience, can you by experience catch all or even most of them? But you cannot even answer this question by experience, since by experience you cannot know how many mistakes you are making in prayer – since, again, you need to learn what is right and what is wrong in the first place, by experience, which is impossible – and therefore you

[71] If you put an inference into the form of an argument, you would have a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. If the conclusion says more than what the premises necessarily imply, then it is an inductive inference, which is always invalid. But to produce knowledge from experience or sensation, you must make numerous inductive inferences. Therefore, learning by experience is always logically fallacious and cannot arrive at truth.

[72] I maintain that it is logically impossible to learn – that is, to form propositions that constitute knowledge – from either successes or failures, since the inferences from such instances will always be fallacious.

cannot tell me if you can catch all or most of your mistakes in prayer by experience. The problem gets worse and worse when we continue to think about it.

In fact, it is very likely that you have been making a number of mistakes when you pray but you do not recognize them as mistakes. Rather than being corrected by experience, the more experience you have in prayer in making those mistakes, the more they are reinforced as habits. By experience, can you even know that it is wrong to pray to the angel Gabriel or to the Buddha rather than to God the Father? Many people have been praying to the Buddha for years, and after so much experience, they still have not recognized their error. In addition, what is our justification for forcing God to endure our mistakes in prayer when we can avoid them simply by reading the Bible? If we learn it from the Bible in the first place, we would know not to make those mistakes at all.

If you insist on learning by experience when God has already given you the necessary information by revelation – that is, by the words of the Bible – in effect are you not shaking your fist toward heaven and saying, "I refuse to use your way to learn how to serve you! I will use my own way!"? Just as it is sinful to serve God one way when he has prescribed another way, it is also sinful to try to learn how to serve him when he has prescribed another way. We must submit to God not only in *what* we think, but also in *how* we come to think it.

The best way to learn about prayer or anything else is by talking about it, reading about it, and thinking about it. Most believers would learn about prayer through this method by reading and listening to instructions delivered by Christian ministers, who are supposed to have studied the Scripture on the subject. However, although the Scripture itself is infallible, human ministers are not. But what at first appears to be a problem only serves to accentuate the advantages of learning through reading and listening. That is, verbal presentations are subject to precise and public scrutiny; they can be the basis for prolonged debate and careful reflection. Through diligent and rigorous discussions on the subject – that is, by talking about it, reading about it, and thinking about it, rather than by doing it – we may arrive at principles concerning prayer and be confident that they are in accordance with the revealed will of God.

## 11. PRAYER AND REVELATION

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

Portions of the Psalms and the Prophets are often used to support the teaching that we should freely express our thoughts and our emotions during prayer, even if they consist of intense frustration, or even anger and bitterness against God. It appears that the assumption is that since the prophets were righteous men, and since these righteous men vented their frustrations to God, therefore we may, or even should, likewise vent our frustrations to God when we pray.

But this is a false inference. From the fact that the prophets sometimes vented their frustrations to God, we cannot immediately infer that we should also do the same. Rather, we must first examine the contexts of the relevant biblical passages, and note the Scripture's own infallible interpretations of and comments on such instances of venting one's frustrations. In other words, the Bible records what the prophets did, but what does the same Bible say about what they did? The biblical characters sometimes bitterly complained to God, but it would be irresponsible to immediately say that we should imitate them without first noting how God responded.

Job, of course, is the classic case. He has been suffering great pains and tragedies, and says:

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

Does God praise Job for his forthrightness, or does he rebuke Job for his words and for his lack of understanding? God says to Job, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!…Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice?

Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:2, 7-8). God does not take pleasure at those who demand of him, "Answer me!" Rather, he will say to these people, "No, *you* answer *me*!"

Habakkuk says to God, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds" (Habakkuk 1:2-3). In verse 4 he states his concern: "Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." This is the state of his own nation.

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

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

What most people fail to note when they try to use the Bible to support an almost unrestrained expression of one's anger and frustration against God is that these instances in the Bible are very different from those that they have in mind, and that the prophets' motivations are often much more noble than their own. The above example from Habakkuk involves a serious historical and political context, and Habakkuk himself was no ignoramus when it comes to theology. The few verses that we have cited already exhibit his recognition of divine eternity and sovereignty, but what he wants to better understand is God's dealing with the nations.

Without examining the answer God gives, since it is not our topic, we should note Habakkuk's words after he has expressed his complaint: "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint" (2:1). Or, as the NASB has it, "I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved."[73] Although his address to God is already much more reverent and informed than many believers in our day, Habakkuk himself expects that God's answer to his complaint will be in the form of a rebuke.

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[73] "What answer I am to make to the *reproof* which I anticipate from God on account of the liberty of my expostulation with Him." *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*; Zondervan, 1961; p. 829.

Jeremiah brings before God a plain question: "You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1). Does God then encourage Jeremiah to vent his emotions, as some Christian writers teach that we should vent our anger toward God just as a frustrated child beats on his father's chest? Or is the Heavenly Father still a God to us? God responds, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (v. 5). In other words, "If you cannot handle what you have been through so far, how can you handle the greater difficulties that are coming?"

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

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

God calls Jeremiah to repent for what he said and stop uttering "worthless words"! Doubtless many professing Christians, influenced by secular psychology and an unbiblical understanding of love, would accuse God of being insensitive. Even the promise God gives to Jeremiah is a repetition and reminder, at most an extension, of what was already given at the beginning of the prophet's ministry:

> Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you. (1:17-19)

Although the Bible records instances in which the prophets vented their emotions toward and against God, the same Bible gives no encouragement for its readers to imitate such behavior. This does not oppose honesty and reverent forthrightness toward God, but the question is whether we should resolve our frustration through venting and complaining in prayer. What we can say for certain is that it is especially irreverent to demand answers from God that he has already given in the Bible. God already said to Habakkuk, "The righteous will live by his faith" (2:4). In other words, if you claim to be a believer, then

believe! Trust God! This is what God will tell you if he responds to your complaint, and if he already said it to the prophets, why does he need to say it again to you?

If we challenge God in the same way as some of the biblical characters did, even though God has already given and recorded his answers, are we not therefore testing his patience? Does it not show that we have little respect for the Bible, and act as if it does not exist? Or do we somehow expect that God will give us different answers to the same questions than those already recorded in the Bible? What justification, then, can we give to vent our emotions and frustrations if God has already responded to them by the words of Scripture? Job had learned his lesson: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more….I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 40:4-5, 42:2). We learn the same lessons as the biblical characters did by reading about them in the Bible, and not by repeating the same behavior that occasioned the answers and rebukes given to the prophets.

Honesty toward God does not translate into unrestrained expression of every negative thought and emotion in prayer. Besides honesty, Scripture also maintains the believer's responsibility to uphold knowledge and self-control. So in Psalm 42, the psalmist says in agony, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (v. 9-10). But he immediately confronts his own attitude and says, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (v. 11). John MacArthur observes, "In this active introspection the psalmist rebukes himself for his despondency."[74]

One of the premises of this book is that in thinking about prayer, we must not focus on the technique of prayer, although that has its place, but to look at the subject from a broader perspective. This is because God responds not only to what we say during prayer, but he responds to the entirety of our lives, including our thoughts and actions while we are not praying. Also, in the introduction to this section and in the previous chapter, I have established that we must not attempt to build our spiritual life with experience as its foundation. The conclusion is that to construct a better spiritual life in general, and a better prayer life in particular, one must enrich his inner life, and this inner life must have biblical revelation as its foundation. In what follows I will elaborate on this principle, and give some suggestions for implementation.

To enhance our spiritual life by constructing our inner life upon biblical revelation, we must practice what MacArthur calls, "active introspection." We may also call it Christian contemplation or meditation. Now, by contemplation or meditation I do not include any mystical element, and I intend a meaning very different from non-Christian or New Age meditation. Christian contemplation does not aim to empty the mind and suspend logic; instead, it aims to fill the mind and apply logic. It does not repudiate rationality to achieve mystical union with the divine; rather, it embraces rationality to think after the thoughts of God. It does not wait for spontaneous insights or personal revelations, but it

[74] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*; Thomas Nelson Bibles, 1997; p. 780.

achieves understanding through deliberate thought and discursive reasoning founded on the infallible revelation of Scripture.

There is a great difference between Christian contemplation and non-Christian meditation. Christian contemplation or meditation is nothing other than active thinking controlled by the words of Scripture. Such meditation is deliberate, conscious, intellectual, rational, and full of content. But not just any content will do – Christian thinking begins from the Reformation principle of "Scripture alone," and proceeds from this starting point to construct a coherent worldview that is applicable to and authoritative in every area of life and thought.

By Christian meditation I mean an activity that involves intense thinking and reasoning, but thinking and reasoning that is grounded upon biblical revelation as its sole foundation. Edmund Clowney writes, "For man to receive God's wisdom, it is not enough for God to display his wisdom in his works. He must also set forth his wisdom in his words….Divine and heavenly mysteries are revealed to us in God-given words. Meditation centers on God's revelation, his Word."[75] If you wish to grow in your spiritual life, then you must enrich your inner life, and such contemplation or meditation is what you must do.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Some people interpret this as telling us to almost not think at all, or at least not to reason about our situation. However, Proverbs 22:19-21 teaches that if you trust in God, you must think, but the difference is in what you think: "So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?" Therefore, to "lean not on your own understanding" does not mean to stop thinking, but it means to stop relying on what you can come up with and to begin relying on the information that God has given to you in the Bible. To trust in God is to believe what the Bible says. In the context of this chapter, we may say that it means to ground your reasoning upon Scripture, and let it supply the content of your thinking, and thus also your praying.

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

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[75] Edmund P. Clowney, *Christian Meditation*; Regent College Publishing, 2002 (original: 1979); p. 21-22.

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

> The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself….And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do….
>
> The essence of this matter is to understand that this self of ours, this other man within us, had got to be handled. Do not listen to him; turn on him; speak to him; condemn him; upbraid him; exhort him; encourage him; remind him of what you know, instead of listening placidly to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you.[76]

Psalm 119:59 says, "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies" (NKJ). It is by thinking, not praying, that anyone will turn to God, for even praying presupposes thinking:

> Before you can speak a single word of prayer, you have to think. You have to use your mind. You need to know who you're praying to. You need to know what you're praying for. You need to know the basis on which you are offering these prayers. So if your prayers are real, and not just some ritual of thoughtless words, they will involve you in a vigorous use of your understanding….When you actually speak with [the Lord], you will spend all the riches of your intelligence in thoughtfully adoring, praising, petitioning and thanking him.[77]

It follows that if "all the riches of your intelligence" is nil, then you cannot pray at all. It also follows that to increase the effectiveness and meaningfulness of your prayer life, you must first work on the intellect. And even when you pray, you must give priority to asking God for wisdom and understanding, as the apostles are prone to practice and recommend:

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[76] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 (original: 1965); p. 21.
[77] *What Happens When I Pray?*; Grace Publications Trust, 1997; p. 38.

> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (Ephesians 1:17)
>
> For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Colossians 1:9)
>
> If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

So by contemplation or meditation, I mean the active and deliberate interaction of your mind with biblical revelation, that is, the words of the Bible, and to relate and apply the spiritual wisdom grasped by your intellect to your own life. Christian contemplation refers to intense theological thinking, but such thinking must have revelation as its foundation. Therefore, the crucial element in Christian contemplation is the careful construction of such a foundation. In other words, thinking is never without content, and the believer receives the content for his thinking from the Bible.

This means that we have several definite options in implementing Christian contemplation. One main source of biblical content to fuel our contemplation comes from reading. Nowadays, to say that you have learned something from a book means to some people that you do not really know it; that is, you can read about something all you want, but you do not know it until you have done it or experienced it. But the Bible itself is a book, and no professing believer should dare say that he does not know or believe that there is a heaven until he experiences it. Jesus tells us, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2). If you consider your experience more reliable than the words of Christ, then by what definition and by what authority are you a Christian?

Richard de Bury says, "A library of wisdom is more precious than all wealth, and all things that are desirable cannot be compared to it. Whoever therefore claims to be zealous of truth, of happiness, of wisdom or knowledge, aye even of the faith, must needs become a lover of books."[78] The Bible is a book, and it is the only infallible standard of truth by which all knowledge is founded, and by which all things are measured. To be effective in spirituality and in learning, we must have more respect for books – surely not the contents of all books, but the very method of learning from books itself.

Although our ultimate and infallible authority is the Scripture alone, to interact with the full range of biblical materials, we ought to consult the insights of other people who have diligently researched and studied the Scripture. Therefore, we are justified in reading books written by believers who have faithfully worked out the meanings and implications of biblical passages, and also to hear sermons and lectures given by them. Nevertheless,

[78] Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*; IndyPublish, 2002 (original: 1473).

we cannot overemphasize the importance of holding only to Scripture as our ultimate and infallible standard.

The process does not end with reading and listening, which supply the content for our thinking, and indeed are parts of contemplation itself, since one cannot read or listen without thinking at the same time. Indeed, even as you have been reading this book, you have been practicing biblical contemplation – thinking about the teaching of Scripture and its implications. However, we must continue to practice contemplation even when we are not reading a book or hearing a sermon. Paul says to Timothy, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7). Spiritual insight usually does not come without rational and deliberate thinking; rather, it is by means of reasoning from the foundation of scriptural revelation that God will grant us wisdom and knowledge. Thus God indeed governs what each of us knows and understands, but usually not without means such as reading and thinking, which are also the two things that Timothy has to do as indicated in the verse above. This again distinguishes Christian contemplation from the meditation of the mystics.

The writer of Psalm 119 says that he thinks on God's law "all day long" (v. 97), and because of this, he is wiser than his enemies and his teachers. Of course, some of you will complain that there is no time to think about theology all day along, but I am unsympathetic. W. Bingham Hunter writes: "In contrast to Jesus, most of us are too busy coping with existence to see prayer as vital or essential. But life *could* be more simple. An older car, a less trendy wardrobe, reupholstered rather than replaced furniture, a little less meat on the table – changes like this could reduce the need for so much income and perhaps provide more time for prayer."[79]

Many people wish to better their spiritual and prayer lives precisely to gain these things that he suggests we should let go in order to better our spiritual and prayer lives. But Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). If you think that life does consist in the abundance of possessions, then you have already fallen into the trap of greed. Alas, once we reduce the importance of material things, there remains no motivation for many people to pray.

Maybe there are things that you can do without threatening your standard of living. If you will stop socializing with unproductive and unspiritual people other than those to whom you are preaching the gospel, if you will stop watching so much television or reading newspapers and magazines, then perhaps you will already be adding hours of free time to your week. Then again, maybe it is necessary for you to make the kind of changes Hunter mentions. However, if you are unwilling to discipline yourself or make any sort of changes, then you are not serious about the Christian faith, and maybe you are not even a Christian, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

God says to his people, "Give careful thought to your ways" (Haggai 1:5). Think about your life. But by what standard do we think about anything? Christian conversion itself

[79] Hunter, *God Who Hears*; p. 189-190.

means that, by the sovereign grace of God, you have abandoned your former way of thinking, and now you have adopted biblical revelation as the foundation – the first principle and the starting point – of all your thought and conduct. Then, Christian sanctification involves making all of your life increasingly consistent with this infallible foundation. You begin to do this by gaining a systematic understanding of biblical revelation, which means that you must immerse yourself in theological reading and reflection. As you continue to think about the words of God, he will grant you understanding, and then you will know that experience counts for nothing, that biblical revelation alone is reliable, and that the answers you seek are already written in the Book that God has given to us.