

Coming to the Throne of Grace

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15, 16

All important exhortation! Let us come boldly, that is, with perfect confidence that we shall be received, to the throne of grace!

To this coming with boldness we are encouraged, first of all, by the very fact that the throne unto which we are exhorted to come is a throne of *grace*; and, secondly, by the knowledge that, in the sanctuary, where this throne of grace is established, we have a high priest that was in all points tempted as we are, and who, because of this, can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

Moreover, it is strictly necessary that we heed this exhortation.

Let us notice that this exhortation is final, occupies the last place in a series of admonitions, and must be regarded as the indispensable condition for all the other exhortations, and that, unless it is fulfilled, we cannot possibly give heed to the admonitions that precede.

There is a rest that remaineth for the people of God, the rest of God's everlasting covenant, the rest from sin and corruption and death, and unto righteousness, light, and fellowship with God. Into that rest we must constantly labor to enter. We must strive to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our mind, and with all our soul, and with all our strength." We must labor to "crucify our old nature, and to walk in a new and holy life."

Moreover, we must "hold fast our profession." With our flesh always tempting us to depart from our profession, in the midst of a world that is opposed to that profession, we are exhorted to maintain, to cling to, the profession that Jesus is Lord, and to realize that profession in all our life and walk in the world.

All this we will never be able to accomplish in our own strength.

To heed these exhortations we are in need of mercy, and of "grace to help in time of need."

This mercy, and this "grace to help in time of need," can be obtained only at the throne of grace.

Let us, therefore, come boldly!



The throne of grace!

How beautiful is the concept conveyed to our mind by this expression!

The term must not be interpreted as referring to the throne of Christ, as some explain it; neither as simply meaning "the throne on which grace reigns," as others would have it, but indicates the throne of God, and therefore His absolute sovereignty, as it is characterized and motivated by grace.

God sits upon His throne.

Also this, we understand, is a figurative expression, for how could we ever know God, or understand anything about Him, except in figures and symbols? That He is enthroned in glory simply denotes His sole and universal and absolute sovereignty. He is the Lord. He is the Creator of the heav-

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ens and of the earth, who calls the things that are not as if they were, and who made all things according to His sovereign counsel and good pleasure. He is, therefore, the sole Proprietor of all things: the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein. His alone is the prerogative to do with them all according to His good pleasure. No one dare say to Him: "What doest Thou?" Moreover, He is the sole Lawgiver, who alone is above the law, and whose will is the sole criterion for every creature; the only Judge, who executes judgment in righteousness and equity. And He governs all things, upholding them by the Word of His power, and directing them, individually and as a whole, to the end that he ordained and purposed in Himself before the foundation of the world, so that no creature moves, and nothing betides, but by His will.

God's throne....

That is, God in His glorious majesty, His undisputed sovereignty, His absolute authority and universal power, His holiness and righteousness and truth.

But this throne of the only Sovereign of heaven and earth is a throne of *grace!*

Glorious truth!

For what else does it signify than this that in Him authority and love, holiness and lovingkindness, righteousness and grace, justice and mercy, are united in perfect and most blessed harmony?

Grace has different connotations in Holy Writ, and we need not call attention to them all in this connection. Let it suffice to say that here it refers to that attitude and disposition of favor in God that shines upon us through the face of Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son our Lord. He is the revelation of the God of our salvation. In the face of Him who is God of God, Light of Light, who is eternally in the bosom of the Father, who reached down to us as the arm of the Lord, united Himself with us, assumed

our flesh and blood, tabernacled among us, lay down His life on Calvary, was raised on the third day, and exalted above the heavens at the right hand of the Majesty on high – in Him we behold the face of the Sovereign of heaven and earth beaming upon us in everlasting grace, the Potentate of potentates as our Father in heaven, the Creator of all as our Redeemer....

The throne of grace!

It means that He purposed all things, that He created all things, that He governs all things, that He directs all things, that He judges all things, motivated by His grace over us in Christ Jesus.

It means that the revelation of His face fills us, to be sure, with awe and holy fear, because of His majesty, but now with the reverence of childlike love and confidence.

Let us come boldly to the throne of grace!

Let us come, that is, not merely in prayer – not, at least, if by prayer is meant an occasional approach to that throne of grace, in order then to return again and draw back into the night of our own existence, into the darkness and gloom and hopelessness of our death – though all our coming to this throne of grace, to this Fount of all life and blessing, is essentially an act of prayer. But rather, let us come,

that is, let us enter into His fellowship; let us approach to the God of our salvation with our whole being, with all our mind and heart and soul and strength to worship and adore, to praise and to serve Him that sitteth upon the throne. Let us come to Him as the overflowing Fount of all good, to drink from that Fount to the satisfaction of our souls, to taste His marvelous mercy and grace, and to know that the Lord is good. Let us come, not to depart again, never to withdraw again into our own night, but

to abide in His tabernacle all the days of our life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple.

Let us come!

That spiritual act of coming to the throne of grace implies, first of all, a profound consciousness and acknowledgment of our own emptiness, of our sin and death, of our need of grace and mercy.

It implies, secondly, the spiritual apprehension of His fullness, of the riches of righteousness and life, of blessedness and glory that are in Him as He stands revealed to us in all the beauty of His grace in the face of Christ Jesus.

It signifies, thirdly, a deep longing for His fellowship, a thirsting after God as the hart, escaped from the chase, thirsts after streams of living water.

And it means, finally, that with confidence of faith we appropriate all the spiritual blessings revealed unto us, promised us, by the symbol of that throne of grace.

Let us come boldly!

Not, indeed, with a boldness that is devoid of holy fear, for the throne of grace is still a *throne*, and that, too, the throne of the most

high Majesty in the heavens; nor with a carnal confidence that is based on our own worthiness, for God resisteth the proud, while He giveth grace to the lowly; but solely

with a confidence that is inspired only by that throne of grace.

The boldness of faith.

The confidence that, for Christ's sake, He that sitteth upon the throne will not cast me off, but receive me, even though all things testify against me.

Blessed throne of grace!



Seek, and ye shall find!

Ask, and it shall be given you; knock, and it shall be opened unto you!

... all our coming to this throne of grace, to this Fount of all life and blessing, is essentially an act of prayer.

Come boldly to the throne of grace, pray without ceasing, let your whole life be an approach to that marvelous throne, that you may obtain mercy, and grace to help in time of need, and mercy and grace you shall surely find and receive.

For him that comes to Him He will in no wise cast out.

Mercy and grace you will find.

They are closely related, yet they may be distinguished, and are distinguished in the text. Mercy is God's will to bless, to bestow bliss upon us in His fellowship, to render us blessed even as He is blessed. It means that God is filled with holy, eternal longing to lead His children into the glory of His everlasting tabernacle. With a view to our present state of sin and death, it denotes that virtue in God, that disposition of the divine heart to usward, according to which He longs to deliver us from the misery of our sin into the state of perfect righteousness, to raise us out of the deep darkness of our death and alienation from Him to the glory of eternal life, and to the heavenly fellowship of His everlasting tabernacle with men. Grace is the power by which all this is accomplished, the marvelous power whereby He redeems us, bestows upon us the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness, makes us partakers of the adoption of children, regenerates us, and calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light, gives us faith and hope and confidence and love and all the riches of grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy, and to find grace to help in time of need.

Ever come!

Constantly approach that throne of grace!

For always you are in need of mercy, and constantly you need grace to help.

Mercy and grace are not gifts that are once bestowed upon you, say in the moment of your regen-

eration, and that ever after you possess in yourselves, apart from the God of your salvation. They are a constant stream that flows into your soul from its source, the throne of grace. They are rather to be compared to the golden glory of light that radiates from the sun, and in whose brightness you may rejoice as long as you remain in the sphere of its radiation, but which you cannot take with you into the darkness of a mountain cave. Not for a moment can you withdraw yourselves from the throne of grace without forfeiting the blessings of mercy and grace as far as your consciousness of them is concerned.

Hence, the time of need is now.

It is an ever-present time.

Mercy and grace you need today and tomorrow, and forevermore.

Besides, you need grace to help, to help in time of need that is now and constantly.

Help you need that you may daily enter into God's rest, that you may put off the old, and put on the new man, that you may put on the whole armor of God, fight the good fight of faith, and be able to stand in the evil day; help to hold fast your profession, not to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, nor to be seduced by the pleasures and treasures of Egypt, nor to be intimidated by the fury of the powers of darkness.

And your only help is in God's grace.

Without Him you can do nothing.

Now is the time of need; now you must obtain grace.

Come, then, always come, to the throne of grace.

That you may obtain mercy, and grace to help.

In time of need.



Be not afraid!

Approach with confidence, and let not even your infirmities induce you to stay far from that throne of grace.

For, as you approach that throne, you are met, in the sanctuary of God, by a High Priest that is over the whole house of God, that intercedes with Him that sitteth upon the throne, and that is able to sympathize with all your infirmities.

O, they are many, but He knows them. They include all our present sufferings and death, of soul and body, of mind and spirit; they are our trials and temptations in the world, our tribulations which we suffer for Christ's sake, as we hold fast our profession; they include our temptations from within, through the sinfulness of our flesh, and from without, through the seducing influence of the world; they are our weaknesses, our sins, our inclination to stumble in the way.

He, our High Priest, who intercedes for us with the Father, is able to sympathize with them all.

He is acquainted with the weakness of our flesh, for He came in the likeness of sinful flesh, though without sin. He knows all our suffering and all our temptations, for He was tempted in all things even as we are, though in all His temptations He never once stumbled. He knows what it is to be utterly amazed at the justice and wrath of God against sin, and at the presence of His holiness, for He bore it all upon the tree, and entered into our death and hell. He knows by experience what it means to be tempted by the wicked machinations of evil men, for He endured all the contradictions of sinners against Himself. Never is your path of suffering and temptation so deep that you do not find there the imprint of His feet.

And He has the right and the power to sympathize with your infirmities, and to obtain mercy and help for you in time of need.

Fear not! Look upon your sympathizing High Priest!

And come to the throne of grace, boldly!

Your reception is assured! 

Prayer: God's Gift to His Covenant People

God's glorious salvation is a multifaceted wonder! God has seen to every aspect of that salvation, from the election of the church in Christ and the redemption in His cross, to the full working out of salvation by the Spirit. The goal and culmination of this salvation is life within the everlasting covenant of grace in the new heavens and earth.

Thus, those whom God saves are not only delivered from sin and death, they are also incorporated into the covenant. That covenant life is blessed, intimate fellowship with God. God draws near to His people by His Word, revealing Himself and His salvation. He dwells in them by the Spirit of Christ, who through the same Word testifies to the elect of their adoption unto sons. But this covenantal communication is not all one sided, that is, only from God to His people. Rather, God gives to His people the blessing of prayer, enabling them to commune with God.

Since prayer is part of covenant fellowship, it is important to understand the nature of the covenant. The covenant is a relationship of love and friendship that God sovereignly establishes with His chosen people in Jesus Christ. It is established with believers and their seed — not all their natural children, obviously, but the children of the promise. The covenant is with Jacob, not Esau. Thus it is with those children of believers who are chosen in Christ.

That covenant of grace flows

out of the covenantal life in God Himself. The triune God is eternally active within Himself. Father, Son, and Spirit dwell in perfect communion. Being one essence, they three are of one mind in all things. However, being three distinct persons, they have personal interaction and fellowship.

In that life, the Father eternally begets the Son of His love in His own image and ever delights in Him. The Son reflects the perfections of the Father with filial delight. And the Spirit, searching the deep things of the Father, proceeds with that knowledge from the Father to the Son as the Spirit of love. Then, the Spirit, knowing the mind of the Son, returns to the Father, breathing the Son's love. This is an intimate life of fellowship, of sharing secrets, of mutual delighting in one another.

The covenant God determined to bring a people into that covenant life for His own glory and delight. He willed to share His secrets with His people (Ps. 25:14). He would dwell with them in time (Ex. 25.8) and in eternity (Rev. 21.3). God determined to make His people active in His covenant life, causing them to know Him and enjoy His friendship.

What an astounding relationship! On the one hand is the sovereign God. He is the God of infinite fullness, needing nothing to complete Him. Eternally self-sufficient is He, and no creature makes God more glorious or blessed than He is eternally in Himself. Then there is man — a

rational creature of the dust. God formed man in His own image so that fellowship might be a possibility. Man, unlike all other creatures of this creation, can know God. Man can also think and will, hope and dream. Man can love and enjoy friendship with other creatures, that is, with other men and women. But how can carnal, earthy *man* fellowship with the invisible and infinite *God*?

God bridges that gap, as already stated, with the gift of prayer. With prayer, God gives His people the right and ability at any given moment or place, to pause in the earthly activities, and by a profoundly spiritual activity to enter the presence of Almighty God, there to speak to Him. Man fellowships with God in prayer! Astounding!

Since prayer is a reality only in the covenant, the nature of the covenant determines the nature of prayer.

It is commonly held that the covenant is conditional, and that God establishes the covenant but both God and man are responsible to maintain it. Not only is that conception of the covenant unscriptural, it ruins prayer. Where both "parties" have stipulations to meet for the covenant to be maintained, the covenant creature would soon avoid prayer. For what could such a man pray? He could not honestly pray that he had kept the conditions. Besides, if a man truly believes that the covenant relationship depends on his activity, he will be out "doing" not praying.

That notion that the covenant, and thus God's blessing, depends on man was the error of Job's friend Bildad. He insisted that only if Job were pure and upright would God hear his prayer (Job 8:5, 6). This view would soon lead the child of God to despair, since he knows that he cannot measure up to God's demands. The alternative is hypocrisy. This was the sin of the Pharisee who came in prayer thanking God that he was not as other men, and therefore God must surely hear *him* (Luke 18:11).

But thanks be to God, the covenant does not depend on us in any way. God, the sovereign God, establishes His covenant with us in Jesus Christ, the covenant Head. In Him, and because of Him, the covenant is never broken off – never. Knowing that, the believer draws near to God only in the blessed name of His Son. There is no other way to the Father.

And God delights in the prayers of His people. Jehovah draws His own to Himself with bands of love. By His Word He reminds them of His infinite love, the love that was demonstrated beyond doubt in the sacrifice of His Son. "You are forgiven," He assures us. "I am thy Father, and you are My people. Come ye and let us commune together." By the power of God's Spirit, His people respond in prayer.

Prayer is, therefore, thankful praise – it is worship. The believer recognizes that he is but a creature of the dust and vile. Consciously entering into God's presence, he drops to his knees in humble adoration. Prayer enables the believer to commune with God, but never as an equal. Prayer should be intimate fellowship, but it is never casual. Believers *worship* God through prayer.

Prayer is *thankful* worship. It is the chief means of expressing thanks to God. By means of words, the believer conveys something of the true thankfulness that floods his soul. He is able to put into

words the reasons for which he gives thanks, why he is grateful, and to what degree, though even these words are inadequate. The redeemed sinner does not go though life tongue-tied and frustrated, forced to wait until he arrives in heaven to express his profound appreciation for the multitude of heavenly blessings that he enjoys. He is able to communicate his thankful praise in his own words every day of his life.

Given that the covenant relationship is between God, the overflowing fountain of all good, and His dependent people, the believer of necessity also makes *requests* in his prayers. God gave prayer for this purpose, though not because He needs to be informed of the needs of His children, for He knows all. Rather, petitions are fitting for the covenant life of God's spiritual family. Even in earthly family life, children easily overlook the goodness of their parents. So do God's children. Thus God instructs them to make requests, specific requests, in order that when He supplies their needs, His people will be conscious of His blessings. "Call upon me in the day of trouble," God commands, adding, "I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15). Ask even, taught the Lord, for your daily bread.

Since prayer is communing with God, it is understandable that He abhors vain repetitions, and He forbids men praying long in order to impress their fellows (Matt. 6:5-7). One can understand how abominable to Him are the false hearted, who "draw near to [Him] with their mouths...but have removed their heart far from [Him]" (Is. 29:13). Rather He would that you go into your closet to pray, and pray from the heart.

For what intimacy is found in prayer! The believer gives expression to the deepest thoughts of his

heart. He confesses sins to God that he will not discuss with his closest earthly friend. The believer reveals weaknesses to God that are hidden from a spouse. What trust is manifest in prayer, that God is such a faithful Friend that He will not turn against the one who thus reveals his weaknesses, yea, even his inmost thoughts!

God knows all. The believer frequently comes to his God ashamed, indeed, unable sometimes even to lift up his face to heaven, for his sins are abominable. Yet the love of God in Christ is infinite and unchanging. There is complete forgiveness. There is a "forgetting" of sins such as friends in this life cannot completely attain. And God continues to reassure His covenant people – come unto Me; seek My face in prayer.

In harmony with the fact that God's covenant is particular, that is, exclusively with His elect, prayer is also for them alone. In fact, the activity of praying marks the believer, distinguishing him from the unbeliever, both the brash "workers of iniquity ... who call not upon the LORD" (Ps. 14:4), and the unfaithful who live in the church for a time, but have "turned back from the LORD...and not ... inquired of him" (Zeph. 1:6). And if these wicked men, whether openly profane or hypocritical churchgoers, should deign in their time of

trouble to call upon God, He will not hear their prayer, for "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer

of the upright is his delight" (Prov. 15:8).

Indeed, God does delight in the prayers of all His covenant people. And since the covenant is made with believers and their (elect) children, the children too learn to pray, and have the assurance, by faith, that they may draw near to God from their youth.

Clearly prayer is important for

...the activity of praying marks the believer, distinguishing him from the unbeliever.

the fellowship of the covenant, and for the blessing of God's people. Evil are the days when in the church "there is none that calleth upon [God's] name" (Is. 64:7). Something is dreadfully wrong in the life of the individual believer when there is little or no interest in prayer.

Oh, we can understand that our old man of sin has no interest in prayer. He hates God and loathes fellowship with the Holy One of Israel. Our depraved nature will do everything in its power to turn us from prayer. The old man will do his utmost to pervert our prayers — pushing irrelevant and even evil thoughts to the fore in the middle of our prayers!

If, and we must say, when, that depraved nature dominates, so that the child of God becomes spiritually lethargic and consequently lax in prayer — what a mighty battle Satan has won! He has cut off communication, cut off fellowship. He

has succeeded in estranging the child from his heavenly Father. The child then seeks his fellowship with the world. This is spiritual disaster.

God knows how essential is prayer for His covenant people. When His people neglect prayer and stray from God, He brings them back into covenant fellowship. It might be by the hard lesson of allowing them to fall into grievous sins. Often God works through a heavy chastisement. The Psalms and our own experience testify that our prayers are never so frequent, never so heartfelt or meaningful, as when we are grievously afflicted. Oh, if such intimate fellowship could only last the rest of our lives. Never do we experience God closer.

But we are so foolish, so earthly minded, that the spiritual intensity soon wanes, and the activity itself falls to a lower priority. Still, God

gives us every encouragement that He will hear us. Jesus spoke a parable in order to impress upon us "that men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). Jesus Himself, more than once, "continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).

Thanks be to God that He continues to draw us back into covenant fellowship. Thanks for the work of Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, who sends His Spirit into our hearts to give us the desire, and even the words, to pray. With boldness we may come to the throne of grace, for Christ Jesus, the Head of the covenant, perfects our prayers and brings them to the Father.

Surely prayer is an inestimable blessing of God to His covenant people. When God commands, therefore, "Seek ye my face," may your heart respond, "Thy face, LORD, will I seek" (Ps. 27:8).

Pray without ceasing! 

Rev. J. Kortering

Cultivating Personal Prayer

With eagerness I take this opportunity to motivate you to pray more often and with greater diligence.

What Is Personal Prayer?

Personal prayer is to be distinguished from public prayer or prayer time spent with others. It takes us into our "inner closet" or moves us to spend time alone with God. It is communion, one to one, with God. "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord, in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up" (Ps. 5:3). The same psalmist added,

"On thee do I wait all the day" (Ps. 25:5). He also included evening, "Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness...I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:1-8). In each of these instances the personal pronoun is used. We recall to mind how Daniel prayed three times a day, looking to Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). One of his prayers is recorded in Daniel 9. No greater example is there than that of our Savior, who frequently spent all night in personal prayer with His Father (Luke 6:12, 13). The apostles knew personal prayer. Paul makes so many references to his prayer for others that we cannot quote them all. Let this suffice: "Without ceas-

ing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request ... that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end that ye may be established" (Rom. 1:9-11).

Why Is Personal Prayer Important?

Experience tells me, and this experience is both personal and pastoral, that such personal prayer is vital to our spiritual health and yet so frequently neglected. Our prayer life is a clear reflection of our spiritual condition. The great hindrance to earnest prayer is formalism. We can hold to formal truth, go through the exercise of religion in a formal manner, conform our lives to a set of approved actions, and yet our hearts can be far from God. If we

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are guilty of this, it will have a direct effect upon our prayer life; we will pray either in a cold and sterile manner or neglect it terribly. Cultivating personal prayer begins right here. I agree with Andrew Murray when he writes in *The Believer's Prayer Life*,

From a defective spiritual life nothing better can be expected than a defective prayer life. It is vain for us, with our defective spiritual life, to endeavor to pray more or better. *It is an impossibility.* It is essential that we experience that he who "is in Christ Jesus is a new creature; old things have passed away, behold all things are become new." This is literally true for the man who understands and experiences what it is to be in Jesus Christ.

We can put this in the context of our beloved Heidelberg Catechism. We must know three things to live and die happily. The fervency and depth of this knowledge affects our spiritual life. The more we know of sin, the more our Savior means to us, and the more we are grateful to God. Prayer is the "chief part of thankfulness."

If our prayer life lacks, we must examine our personal salvation. This is basic and the foundation of everything else we write in this article.

I ask you, is your personal prayer life what it ought to be? Before I give you any practical suggestions how you may cultivate it, I address these words to your heart: if you doubt the promises of God given in His Word in any way, if you are walking in any sin and making excuses for them rather than forsaking them, if you are so preoccupied with this world with its treasures and pleasures that you have little time for God, deal with those matters first of all. Honest spiritual self-assessment will contribute more than anything

to your prayer life. It will move you to pray out of earnest necessity and will give to you spiritual blessings that only heaven can eclipse.

Why is personal prayer important for you? You may pray with your spouse, you may pray with your children, you may pray in school or in church, and all of this is wonderful and important, but nothing may replace your own quiet time with God. Why is this? Let me offer four reasons.

1. Salvation is personal, and none of us is able to enter heaven carried on the backs of others. You may have a godly wife who is very devout in her relationship with God, but her faith cannot become your faith. The church may be dedicated to uphold the Word of God and honor God in her worship, but mere association with the church cannot replace personal faith. In the broadest sense this is true of the entire covenant sphere of church, home, and Christian school. Being in such a wonderful environment of piety will not of itself make a person a Christian and one right with God. It all comes down to personal faith. God has

ordained that He works and strengthens this faith by means of the Word and sacraments — this is the unique

importance of public worship. Such personal faith comes to expression in our own personal relationship with God. Quiet time with God allows us to develop this relationship.

2. Our spending time alone with God is necessary for us to deal with personal sins. We can never do this adequately if we are always in the presence of others and never alone with God. Public confession of sin is always a general reference and lacks specific content. We give our confession of sin personal content when we pray alone with God. This is the importance of the "inner closet." Here we come to terms

with our own "besetting sins," the knowledge of which cannot be shared with anyone else. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me when I call" (Ps. 66:18). Here we measure our spiritual progress to overcome temptation in our lives. Here we taste the sweetness of divine forgiveness and the promise for renewed grace to overcome. If you lack personal prayer, you lack spiritual honesty with God.

3. We use this quiet time to make an evaluation of our progress in spiritual growth and in our doing the will of our heavenly Father. We cannot do that when we pray with others. We need to be alone. The same is true when we evaluate the spiritual progress of those who are closest and dearest to us. A husband reflects upon the spiritual progress of his wife and she of him in their quiet time. Fathers do this as fathers, and mothers as mothers. This helps us stay in touch with those areas of life where we have to help each other. Quiet reflection guides us into specific areas of need, and we make this the subject of our personal prayer and guideline for our actions. We can broaden out on this: quiet time includes evaluation of the needs of all those who cross our pathway and leads to our personal prayers of intercession.

4. Finally, personal prayers are the greatest help for us to develop the art of praying. If you struggle with family prayers or any time you are called upon to pray publicly, the greatest thing you can do to make this easier is to develop the godly practice of personal prayer. As you grow in the experience of your own personal prayers, you will develop a heart for God. Your relationship with God will be strengthened and you will learn that "conversation with Him" is important to you and you enjoy it and treasure the experience. This will motivate you to put forth the necessary effort to grow in this and in the blessings of spiri-

Our prayer life is a clear reflection of our spiritual condition.

tual honesty that always come with personal prayer. This will help you to pray publicly, since the formation of thoughts in prayer will become natural for you. Praying is a spiritual art to be sure, but it can also be cultivated.

How Can Personal Prayer Be Cultivated?

1. You must exercise self discipline to set aside time for this activity. The most common objection raised is, "I don't have the time to do this." If the Spirit of God is truly in your heart, you will give this such priority that you will make the time available. There are a few things to consider. I recall counseling a new convert who enthusiastically decided he would arise at 5 A.M. every morning and spend two hours with God. He had a long face at our next session together because he discovered it wasn't working out. He fell asleep every morning. We talked a bit more and learned he was not a morning person. He was practically dysfunctional until about 9 A.M. He was a "night person." He could stay awake at night. So he shifted his quiet time to the evening, which was much better.

More than that, you have to remove distractions as well. If you are a night person, you can develop a habit of watching television, playing with the computer, hobbies of all sorts, or falling to sleep on the couch out of boredom. Then you have to change that behavior and put away the distraction.

One more thing: you have to be consistent in setting aside the same time, or you will fail. There are enough things out there beckoning for our attention, but we ought to give top priority to our quiet time and personal prayer time with God. That is why you have to set aside the time that is least intrusive in your life. For many, this is early morning, when you can consistently arise before your work day begins and enter into personal fellowship with God.

For stay-at-home moms, it can be when the children are off to school or taking their naps. For others it is just before bedtime. This is a personal choice, but the most significant one when it actually comes to praying.

2. You have to create a spiritual frame of mind for prayer. Most of us know we cannot punch some magical button to become spiritual with God. We are by nature focused upon earthly things. Prayer is a wonder of grace that transforms us into heavenly saints. This transition requires of us activity that will "tune our hearts toward God." Here too, there are different possibilities. The reading of a Scripture passage is always helpful. Here you can include your systematic Scripture reading if you like.

The danger of trying to finish the Bible every year is that you read with a view to finishing chapters rather than careful reflection. The need here is for reflection, devotional reading, pondering what God is saying and whether you understand it and know how to apply it to your life. Devotional writings also fall into this category. Psalms and hymns are very helpful in this connection. Some instrumental music quiets the soul. At other times it might be vocal singing that edifies through the message. Music can be very helpful to quiet your soul so you can enter the presence of God for prayer.

3. Take time to reflect upon your life. This includes many things — your personal sins and how you are dealing with them, is there progress? Are you conscious of areas of weakness in your life (your relationship with others, for example). What are you doing to correct and improve this? What afflictions are you dealing with, and how are you handling them? What blessings has God given to you, and are you mindful of them and thankful for them? Are there oth-

ers who cross your pathway who have needs, and are you paying attention to how you can meet those needs in their life (this relates to both physical and spiritual needs). Journalizing is very helpful here. This is simply writing down the spiritual issues in your life, along with Scripture passages that are helpful, and how you are responding and dealing with them. The advantage of writing this down is for personal perusal later, as an assessment of your spiritual maturing and for a reminder of how to deal with issues when they recur.

4. This reflection ought to lead you to make a list of things for which you ought to pray to God. If you have a good memory, maybe you don't need to do this. I know from my own experience that I

Praying is a spiritual art to be sure, but it can also be cultivated.

enjoy writing down such things for two reasons: One, it helps me to keep them before my mind so that I can keep them in focus. You will discover that your list can become very long. The other is that, with such a list, you can take note of how God is dealing with your petitions and what changes are taking place regarding these needs. Soon, many of the items that were placed on the list as great burdens become occasions for petitions of thanksgiving. This keeps us in tune with God's work in our lives. God's sovereignty is never an excuse for fatalism and prayerlessness. Rather we experience that God works wonders in our lives and in the lives of people for whom we care in the way of our praying.

5. Spend time in actual prayer. This, of course, is the goal and has to be given the emphasis. We are not simply meditating on life, we are doing these things with a view to personal prayer. Even then, we must remember that our personal prayers can be varied and need not be the same every day. Generally, it is helpful if we include certain categories in our

prayer that will allow us variety and fervency. It is good to begin with praising God for who He is and for His wonderful works, also those in our lives. Thanksgiving is also fitting in this regard. We must include a time of confession of sin and of seeking forgiveness and renewal. We bring our own needs

to God and the needs of others – the prayer of intercession. We conclude with the assertion of God’s faithfulness and holding to Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

Frequently the question arises how long ought I to pray? Never pray by the clock. Never measure your godliness by the length of

your prayer (that will lead to Phariseeism). Rather, if this is new to you, you begin with a short time and learn the wonderful blessings of it, and you will soon understand how Jesus could spend all night in prayer with His Father.

May God give all of us a heart for prayer! 

Rev. Ron Cammenga

Congregational Prayer

God’s house is a house of prayer (Matt. 21:13). All our public worship is to be “prayerful” worship, that is, worship consciously given in the presence of God. This is what prayer is. Prayer is coming into the very presence of God. Since God’s house is a house of prayer, one of the most important aspects of public worship is the congregational prayer. Just as prayer is the chief part of thankfulness for the believer individually, so it must be regarded as the chief part of the thankful worship of the gathered congregation. Both the minister who leads in congregational prayer and God’s people who collectively offer up the congregational prayer must take this element of worship seriously. Each has a role to play, a calling to fulfill in the worship that congregational prayer is.

The Minister’s Role

The minister of the gospel is called upon to pray at many different times and in various settings. He prays when he brings God’s Word in his pastoral labors, with those whom he counsels, at sick

beds, while teaching catechism classes and leading Bible study societies. He prays at council and consistory meetings, in various committees of the church and denomination, as well as at the broader assemblies. He prays at weddings and funerals, in circumstances of great joy and deep sorrow. Chief among his duties in prayer is his calling to lead in prayer during the worship service, especially his calling to lead in the congregational prayer.

The apostle Paul refers to this duty of the minister when he exhorts Timothy regarding the “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks” that as a pastor he is to offer up to God on behalf of the congregation (I Tim. 2:1). The *Form of Ordination of the Ministers of God’s Word* underscores the importance of this duty when it lists as the second main calling of the minister his calling to lead in congregational prayer: “Secondly. It is the office of the ministers publicly to call upon the name of the Lord in behalf of the whole congregation.” Article 16 of our Church Order likewise refers to this aspect of the minister’s labors, mentioning it first in the order of the duties that fall to the minister: “The office of the minister is to continue in prayer and in the ministry of the Word....”

What the minister must be conscious of is that he is called to lead the *congregation* in prayer. He is not offering up personal prayer in the hearing of the members of the church, but he is functioning as the spokesman and representative of the congregation. It is not *his* prayer, in the final analysis. It is the prayer of the *congregation*. In the preaching of the Word, the minister functions as the spokesman and representative of God. Similarly, in the offering up of the congregational prayer, he is the mouthpiece of the congregation.

Because of the importance of the congregational prayer, the minister must prepare himself before he leads the congregation in prayer. Thorough preparation is necessary before the minister mounts the pulpit to preach God’s Word. The same sort of careful preparation ought to take place before the minister brings the saints into God’s presence in the worship of prayer. Woe to that minister who does not prepare or who prepares inadequately for preaching! But woe also to that minister who does not diligently prepare for the high and holy calling of leading God’s people in congregational prayer! At the same time, what rich blessings God’s people and the minister himself reap as the result of good preparation before offer-

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ing up the congregational prayer.

Preparation for congregational prayer may take various forms. Each minister will have his own way of preparing. Certainly that preparation ought to include reflection and meditation. This will often be the last part of his preparation before going to church to conduct the worship service – fifteen or twenty minutes spent in quiet contemplation of the congregational prayer he will offer up. That preparation may include the reading of a psalm. So many of the psalms are prayers and contain prayers. Reading and meditating on a psalm will often suggest to the minister thoughts and petitions to include in his congregational prayer.

It may also be helpful to read the prayers of others. The minister can profit considerably from others who have struggled with and mastered, at least to a great degree, the spiritual art of public prayer. Let me recommend the prayers of John Calvin. You can find collections of his prayers in various volumes. Many of his Old Testament commentaries, which were not written really as commentaries but delivered as lectures to his students, include his prayers with his students when these lectures were given. There are other helpful collections of public prayers. Allow me to recommend a few. *Prayers of the Reformers*, compiled by Clyde Manschreck; *Prayers in the Congregation*, by Henry Ward Beecher; *C.H. Spurgeon's Prayers*, introduced by Dinsdale T. Young; *The Joseph Parker Treasury of Pastoral Prayers*, introduced by Stephen Olford; and *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, edited by Arthur Bennett.

Careful preparation will enable the minister to avoid the many pitfalls that attend offering congregational prayer. There are any number of faults of which the minister ought to be aware as concerns congregational prayer. These faults concern both the form of congregational prayer and the contents of

these prayers. The limitations of space prevent us from discussing these faults. I recommend that the serious-minded pastor who is concerned to avoid and perhaps even overcome these faults consult Prof. Herman Hanko's fine work, *Public Prayer*. The Professor deals at length with these faults, both pointing them out and suggesting ways in which they can be overcome.

Prayer is a gift. The ability to pray publicly, to lead others in prayer, is a gift. It is a gift and ability necessary in the ministry of the gospel. A man who cannot pray publicly cannot be a minister. But like all spiritual gifts, this gift too can be developed. The minister ought to strive for the development of this gift, always working at improving his congregational prayers.

The elders have a role to play here. The elders are called by God to supervise the work of the minister. That supervision extends not just to his work of preaching, but includes also the minister's congregational prayers. The elders ought to feel free to offer suggestions, and even necessary criticisms, concerning the minister's congregational prayers. And the minister ought to be open to the suggestions and criticisms of his elders.

The Congregation's Role

As important as the minister's role is in congregational prayer, not to be overlooked is the role also of the congregation. It is the *congregational* prayer, after all. It is not the congregational prayer because it is a prayer *for* the congregation. It is the congregational prayer because it is a prayer offered *by* the congregation. This is the understanding that the members of the church must have of the congregational prayer. It is their prayer to God as the gathered congregation of believers and their seed.

The members of the church

must consciously make the prayer of the minister their own. They must not only follow the prayer, but they must pray along with the minister. They must cry out to God, make supplication before Him, extol His great name, offer up their petitions, and give expression to their thankfulness before Him. This is difficult, exceedingly difficult, as the work of prayer always is. For the members of the church, congregational prayer is an exercise of faith. And it is the struggle of faith to pray aright.

One of the great difficulties of congregational prayer is the temptation to allow our minds to wander when the minister is praying. How easy it is to lose focus and to begin thinking about ourselves. While the minister is praying, we allow our minds to be filled with thoughts of our earthly lives, thinking about the events of the past week or making plans for the week ahead. Only when the minister concludes the prayer with the "Amen" is our attention re-directed and our thoughts brought back again to worship. The members of the congregation must work at it, not to allow this to happen, to stay focused during congregational prayer.

It is vital that the minister duly prepare himself before offering up congregational prayer. But the members of the congregation ought also to prepare themselves for this important aspect of public worship. This ought to be part of the spiritual preparation for the Lord's Day and for each church service. The members ought to go to church ready and eager, not only to hear God's Word, but to pray. Due preparation on the part of the members will go a long way to preventing lapses in this part of worship.

The members of the church ought to strive for reverence during the congregational prayer. This is an important part of all prayer and is certainly an important part

It is the congregational prayer because it is a prayer offered by the congregation.

of congregational prayer. The members, including the children and the young people, ought to reflect reverence during the prayer even in their posture. Our custom is to sit during the congregational prayer. But then, the members ought to sit erect, with heads bowed and hands folded. Congregational prayer is not a time to slouch down in the pew, relax, and take a snooze. Not only is that irreverence in prayer, but it assures that we will lose focus in the course of the prayer.

Parents must teach their chil-

dren the place and importance of congregational prayer, as well as proper behavior during prayer. They ought to instruct their children to sit still during the prayer, with hands folded and heads bowed. And they ought to take a peek, once in awhile, to make sure that their children are behaving properly during the congregational prayer. Parents often ask their children about the contents of the sermon: "What did the minister preach about today?" That is a good practice and encourages the children to listen to the sermon. It

might be a good idea for parents to ask their children periodically, "What did the minister pray for today?"

In the way of both the minister and the members carrying out their respective roles in congregational prayer, these prayers of the church will be a blessed part of the public worship of God. The congregational prayers will honor God, as He deserves to be honored by the worship of His church. And just in that way the congregation herself will be richly blessed through these prayers. 

Rev. Garret Eriks

Family Prayer

In our homes, the highlight of the day is the evening meal. The family that was separated during the day reunites for a time of fellowship around the supper table. The great blessing of these daily meals is not first the food prepared by mother, but the fellowship of the family, as everyone takes a turn rehearsing what happened throughout the day. However, the fellowship at the family mealtime is not simply with each other. Customarily, it is also a time of fellowship with God in family worship. One of the great blessings in our covenant homes is the time our families gather for daily family worship. Before the meal, a prayer is offered to God, thanking Him for the food and for His care for the family throughout the day. After the evening meal, often with one of the young children on his lap, father reads a passage of Scripture, leads the family in a discussion of the truth found in that

passage, and finishes by calling the children to fold their hands and bow their heads in prayer. The home in which this worship is the highlight experiences rich blessings from God.

A necessary element of this family worship is habitual, sincere family prayer. How is your family prayer life? Do you find that your prayers after the evening meal become repetitions that mean nothing? Is prayer rushed so that you can attend other activities? Do you fathers give much thought to what you pray, or is your prayer offered with a lick and a promise? It is important for us to be recommitted in our homes to faithful family prayer because of the many threats to this aspect of our family worship.

When believers and their children pray together, they fellowship with Jehovah by speaking to Him. In this family prayer, the head of the home usually leads the family to the throne of grace to praise and thank their heavenly Father for His many blessings, to confess the sins of the home, and to request what they need for body and soul. What distinguishes family prayer from

personal prayer and congregational prayer is that those who are part of a family, living in the same home, come to the throne of grace. The one who leads in prayer brings the entire family before God. This is what makes family prayer especially difficult for the one who leads. He must put words in the mouths of his family so that what he prays is their prayer.

Family prayer is vital for the spiritual health of the covenant family. What breathing is to our earthly lives, prayer is to our spiritual lives. This is not only true for us individually, but this is true for us in our family life. Prayer is the backbone of a spiritually healthy family. A family that does not pray will be spiritually weak. A family that regularly seeks the throne of grace in the right way will be spiritually strong.

God's Word demands such family prayer. God's Word does not simply provide a good suggestion. The call to family prayer does not simply come to your home highly recommended by me and other officebearers. Clearly God urges family prayer upon His children. We do not find specific passages

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that demand this family prayer. Nevertheless, we find this calling by putting together different passages concerning prayer and family worship. Jesus says in Luke 21:36, "Watch ye, therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." Romans 12:12 says, "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer." In I Thessalonians 5:17, God commands us, "Pray without ceasing." Jesus Himself demands prayer. This demand is carried out partly in family prayer.

Family prayer has been the long-standing practice established by God Himself. It began soon after the fall when God's people began to worship Him publicly, which we read in Genesis 4:26: "then began men to call upon the name of the LORD." This is in the context of Jehovah providing the covenant seed of Seth instead of Abel. And to Seth Jehovah gave the son Enos. Adam and Eve and their children and their children's children prayed to and worshiped Jehovah, as a family. Another example of family worship and prayer is found in Joshua 24:15, when Joshua vows, "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." We can be sure Joshua's confession included family prayer. In the New Testament, we read concerning Cornelius, a Roman captain, that he was "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2). From these many examples it is clear that God demands family prayer.

God calls the head of the home, husband and father, to lead the family in prayer. This does not mean fathers are the only ones who may lead the family in prayer. When father cannot be present, the mother leads the children in prayer. In fact, it is good for mothers to lead the children in prayer at breakfast or lunch when father

is not present. At other times, father may have one of the children lead in prayer. In our home, one of the children often leads in prayer before the meal so that they learn how to pray. The head of the home is called to oversee family prayer.

This family prayer, as a part of family worship, must be habitual. Habitual prayer is not just a good idea, but this is the good instruction of God Himself. In Daniel 6:10, Scripture records Daniel praying to Jehovah with his window open to Jerusalem, on his knees, three times a day. Daniel had fixed times of prayer in his life — probably morning, noon, and night. David speaks of his own habitual prayer life in Psalm 55:16, 17: "As for me, I will call upon God; and the LORD shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." Because individually we must have a fixed pattern for prayer, so also this is true for our family prayers. Scripture does not demand that it be at these set times or three times a day. But the principle found in these passages is that prayer must be habitual. Family prayer must be a daily habit in our home. Often when we think of habits, we ponder our bad habits. But family prayer is a good and necessary habit.

Let us beware of the many attempts of Satan to disrupt family prayer. Probably the most common excuse for not conducting regular family worship and praying is that we are too busy. We read a passage of Scripture with our families. We explain that passage. But then we take a look at the clock and we have to leave in a few minutes. The game will be on soon. If any element gets the short end of the stick, it is prayer. Not enough time was left for prayer, so we rush. Satan loves it when this happens.

Satan also uses sin to disrupt family prayer. Instead of a dinner

of herbs where love is, our meal-time can turn into a time of quarreling and yelling. Often this is because Dad or Mom had a bad day and they are crabby. Their bad mood infects the children also, so that the time of fellowship is ruined. Satan baits us to disrupt our prayer life. How can we pray to God rightly when we have just been yelling and fighting?

Family prayer must be characterized by urgency and sincerity. Our family prayers must be wholehearted. Fathers, does this characterize your prayers? Do your prayers consist of the same words every night? Do you just try to squeeze prayer in at the end of supper before you sit down in front of the television or read the newspaper?

Or do you sweat and labor in prayer? Speaking to God in prayer is hard work. Jesus warns against vain repetitions in Matthew 6:7: "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." Jehovah God is not pleased with vain repetitions. This is why we should not be content simply to pray the Lord's Prayer every night as the main family prayer. It is the perfect prayer. But there is the danger that those words mean nothing after awhile. In our family prayers, we must choose our words carefully because we lead our family in speaking to the Holy God. God is not pleased with an abundance of words.

Our prayers with our families will be sincere when we know our need to pray. We need to pray to give thanks to God. Pray in the consciousness of the amazing covenant grace of God. God is so good in the line of generations. He provides covenant children and covenant parents. He has delivered us and our children from our sins in Jesus Christ. God is the Giver of every good and perfect gift. In prayer, we must

Family prayer is vital for the spiritual health of the covenant family.

thank and praise God because He is our Savior, Redeemer, and Rock.

Our prayers will be sincere and living when we pray knowing our need for His grace and Holy Spirit (Lord's Day 45). Family prayer is the time to pray for the spiritual needs of the family. These prayers must not be used to rebuke naughty children. But it is a time to pray for the grace to control our tongues. It is the perfect opportunity to pray for family love. Family prayer must be conducted because God demands it, but also because we need it!

Finally, I humbly present a few suggestions for family prayer. These items are intended to be suggestions and not laws. I am not saying this is the best way to conduct family prayer. But here are ideas for fathers (and mothers) in this difficult task of leading the family before the throne of grace.

First, the great struggle I find in leading family prayer is staying fresh, so that my prayers do not become vain repetitions. This can especially become difficult for men who are home for more than one meal a day, which requires more family prayers. How do we stay

fresh? We must work at praying. The first time we think about the family prayer at the end of a meal should not be when we close our Bibles just before prayer. At the very least, throughout the meal we should consider what we will include in our prayer. We should consider the faithfulness of God through another day and thank God for the blessings bestowed. There is no replacement for preparation!

To stay fresh, the head of the home can use the Scripture passage that was just read. This brings home the truth of what was just read practically for the family when it is included in the prayer. In general, when one prays, it is a good idea to use the language of Scripture. The more we grow in our knowledge of God's Word, the easier we will find praying to God.

Secondly, brevity is important especially with younger children in the home. Hard words, long sentences, and long prayers will be difficult for the children to follow and understand, which hinders that prayer from becoming their own prayer. With younger children, we should try to bring the prayer to their level so that to a certain de-

gree they can understand. This does not mean we pray like a little child. Brevity and simplicity must have limits. However, this is an important principle of prayer.

Finally, family prayer is a time of teaching according to the demand of Deuteronomy 6:6, 7. God calls parents to teach their children how to pray. The prayers of father at the time of family worship are a teaching tool, whether we are conscious of it or not. If our prayers are vain repetitions that are rushed, our children will learn to pray the same way. However, when we pray humbly, from the heart, praising God and petitioning God for the things we truly need, such prayers teach our children how to pray rightly. In all of our prayers we must be conscious that we are teaching. Let us be faithful in teaching our children the right way to pray. Part of this instruction is having our children pray. This begins with memorized prayers. But they should also be taught to pray their own prayers and lead the family in prayer.

May the practice of daily, sincere family prayers bear the fruit of strengthening our covenant homes. 

MaryBeth Lubbers

Teaching Our Children to Pray

"Suffer the little children to come unto me...."

Mark 10:14

If a woman doesn't know much about fine needlework, it is probably best that she not give lessons in crocheting. If a man has never ventured out on the high

seas, it is undoubtedly the better part of wisdom to let someone else give pointers on the techniques of sailing. So it is with teaching children to pray — one must himself be instant in prayer, a man or woman in close communion with God, and a believer who has practiced the art of prayer in order to teach another how to pray. It is sobering business for oneself to pray, how much more to teach another how to pray. Even though one may be perfectly capable of teaching the key elements of prayer and pos-

sesses a certain degree of eloquence, what about the humility, the sincerity, and the heartfelt devotion implicit in true prayer? Can that be taught as well? Regrettably, it is possible that one will merely be teaching one's own bad theology or thoughtless habits as one teaches another how to pray. Nevertheless, Scripture assures us that "prayer is within reach of all — the sick, the aged, the infirm, the paralytic, the blind, the poor, the unlearned — all can pray. It avails you nothing to plead want of

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memory, and want of learning, and want of books, and want of scholarship in this matter. So long as you have a tongue to tell your soul's state, you may and ought to pray" (*The Duties of Parents*, by John Charles Ryle).

Even the disciples, grown men all and certainly skilled in the traditions of Hebrew prayer, felt a lack in their prayer life. On one occasion, when Jesus had just finished praying, they ask Him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1 and 2). Having been with Jesus in so many different situations, they must have noticed the striking difference between the integrity of Jesus' prayers and their own stilted prayers. Undoubtedly, Jesus had already taught them how to pray by His example. Now, they ask for a model prayer that will include all the elements of acceptable prayer.

Jesus instructs them "to pray after this manner" and recites to them the very familiar Lord's Prayer.

Immediately, one notices that this prayer is comparatively short and concise. Nothing in it is complicated. Its beauty is its simplicity. The scribes and Pharisees, by contrast, were known for long, wordy prayers. Next, a careful observer notices that Jesus has addressed God as "Our Father." This is a first for the disciples, since the accepted Jewish address in prayer was the less intimate "God" or "Lord." Finally, it is clearly a prayer that exalts God and humbles man, makes a simple request for daily bread, and a plea for forgiveness of sin, all based on who God is and what advances his kingdom.

Teach this prayer to your children first of all. It is a perfect prayer. It cannot be improved upon. Although this prayer is not intended to be prayed literally only, neither should one be embarrassed to pray it regularly. In *Luther's Small Catechism*, each simple prayer that he teaches to the children includes the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. As the children

gain understanding, explain the richness of this prayer and talk about it, for as the Heidelberg Catechism explains: prayer must contain all things necessary for soul and body. The Lord's Prayer does.

Since the prayers of God's children are a sweet-smelling savor to God as well as the chief means of expressing our thankfulness to Him, we must teach our children to send this perfume to God. From the years of highchair to high school, we as parents, teachers, and ministers must train the children to pray. They will not learn proper prayer by osmosis. They must be taught how and what to pray from earliest infancy. In their book *The Family*, authors Palmer and Alexander rightly claim: "It is a useful lesson for the speechless babe, to acquire the patient stillness of the hour of prayer" (p. 67). Children and young people learn how to pray by listening to father and mother pray, but another level in a child's prayer life is reached when he is able to pray aloud. There is indeed a place for silent prayer in the life of each believer, but young children are not best served by doing so. Children learn best by engaging their senses in a concrete, tactile way. Close your eyes. Fold your hands. Repeat after me. Memorized, repetitious, audible prayers are as beneficial for children as they can be for adults.

Whether or not one prefers *ex tempore* prayers to prepared prayers, there is merit to written or formula prayers (*The Book of Common Prayer*, and the prayer book of the Puritans, *The Valley of Vision*, come to mind), and if today they have no other purpose, they can effectively serve as springboards for one's individual prayer subjects. Children, especially, should learn the elements of prayer by following the pattern of a prayer that is reverent, orderly, definite, thorough, and fitting for the occasion. For this reason, our baptism

and communion forms include prepared prayers as well.

And how important it is to teach the children at a tender age to praise God by reciting His attributes and virtues! Extolling Jehovah's holiness, majesty, omnipotence, faithfulness, goodness, creative work, providential care, lovingkindness, and mercy should be taught the children as early as possible to be important elements in their prayers. Petitioning God seems to come naturally—already at a young age we are rather good at asking for things—whereas blessing His name is often put on a back burner, so to speak. Yet, who will tell His praises if we His people are negligent to do so? Must He raise up stones to relate His greatness (Matt. 3:9)?

What are good prayers, then, to teach our children? Since our children most regularly pray at mealtimes and bedtimes, one can do no better than to go to the Psalms for guidance, learning from David's unmatched outpourings to God. Psalm 103:1 and 2 is suitable

They will not learn proper prayer by osmosis.

for a child's mealtime prayer, as is Psalm 23. Habakkuk 3:17 and 18 are fitting verses to memorize for mealtimes. Some parents

and teachers like to teach a rhyming prayer, more like poetry. I submit the following prayers with the understanding that the prayer be properly addressed to God our Father (not to Christ as some prayers like "Jesus, Tender Shepherd, Hear Me" erringly do), and that each prayer include the petition for the forgiveness of sins, which petition has fallen on hard times in many Christian circles.

Father great, and God, all good,
We thank Thee for this food.
By Thy hand must we be fed;
Give us, Lord, our daily bread.

Be present, at our table, Lord.
Be here and everywhere adored;
Thy children bless, and grant that
we
May eat and drink to honor Thee.

Forgive our many sins.
For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Lamentations 3:22 and 23 is a wonderful morning prayer, as is Psalter number 391. Psalm 139:23 and 24 lends itself well to an evening prayer. The seven-word prayer of Nehemiah, "Remember me, O my God, for good," has merit both as to its covenantal number of words and its content. Its brevity can be refreshing as well. Psalm 19:14 is a wonderful prayer for all occasions, and I often use this prayer with the students at the end of the school day. I remember one traumatic school day when all the first graders were huddled under their desks during a dark, threatening tornado alert. Over the whimpers of the children and the ferocity of the storm, we began to pray the words of Psalm 56 (Psalter number 152). "What time I am afraid I put my trust in Thee; In God I rest, and praise His word, so rich and free." We sang our prayer that frightening day. Read your Psalter verses and discover the wealth of rich prayers be-

tween its covers. Here is a gentle evening prayer for little ones:

Father, teach me to pray,
And now accept my prayer;
Thou hearest every word I say,
For Thou art everywhere.

A little sparrow cannot fall
Unnoticed, Lord, by Thee;
And, though I am so young and
small,
Thou dost take care of me.

Teach me to do what'er is right,
And when I sin, forgive;
And make it still my chief delight
To love Thee while I live. Amen.

It has been said that prayer is a holy art. Without question, learning to pray takes practice, discipline, and experience. For children, in addition, it takes correction and encouragement. Each of us adult believers has learned to pray through a lifetime of halting, incremental steps. As very young children, we spend much more time listening to others pray than in leading others in prayer. As we become older we take a few turns

leading in family and classroom devotions so that our hearts will not leave our chests in nervousness and wild hammerings if called upon to pray aloud in Young People's Society or other family, school, and church functions. Then, when at last one is placed at the head of a family, one can "carry forward the blessed institution in which one has been reared, and convey the words of life to coming generations" (*The Family*, p. 70).

It is of inestimable comfort to know that although I often seem to pray in weakness and insincerity — my prayers not going past the ceiling as it were — that standing in the great gulf that separates me and my Father is One who perfects my prayers and presents them faultless before the Father. The great Intercessor assures that my feeble stammerings are rendered as great paeans of praise to the Father. His life-giving work encourages me to teach the children to pray as well.

My duty, my desire, and my singular delight, then, is to teach the children to pray. 

Rev. David Overway

Prayer and the Sovereignty of God

Prayer changes things. Perhaps you've seen this phrase inscribed on some plaque in a Christian bookstore or in someone's dining room. Perhaps you've seen it on a greeting card or on a piece of stationery. Though it's a fairly popular expression, we note that it is an ambiguous one. It can be understood as setting out either a correct idea or an incorrect one.

There is a certain sense in which it is correct. From a certain point of view, prayer does change things. But many understand it and intend it the wrong way. They intend that the phrase be taken without explanation or qualification, simply: "prayer changes things." And understood this way, the statement is decidedly unbiblical and unreformed, i.e., wrong.

This short, well-known expression brings into focus the important issue of prayer as it relates to the sovereignty of God. How can this phrase be taken correctly? How can it be true both that prayer changes

things and that God Himself sovereignly rules over all things and thus changes things? What qualifying truths must one have in mind in order to make this phrase square with the doctrine of God's perfect sovereignty over all things?

Before we answer these questions, though, we ought to see how this expression captures the prevailing but erroneous view of prayer in the modern church world. Many understand prayer in such a way that they would take this phrase to mean: Prayer *determines* things. A person's life and the circumstances and events of his

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life are determined by his prayers. This is the prevailing understanding in Christendom today.

According to this idea, prayer is viewed as the work of man whereby one can persuade God to do something the person desires. It is usually admitted that God controls things in a general way. He at least has the power to give good things to those who ask them of Him. But, it is argued, since man has a free will, God cannot simply impose things on him. So we need to pray for these good things so that He is able to give us the things we desire. Then really it is the praying person that determines the outcome of things. Often it is added that one must pray fervently, frequently, and in faith. And if these prerequisites are not met, then the prayer will be ineffective. Then if the praying person does not receive what he asked for, it is explained to him that he failed in one or more of these requirements and he is encouraged to try again.

For example, a man is unemployed and would like a job. God has the power to give this man a particular job, but since the man has the freedom to make his own choices, God cannot force this particular job on him. The man prays to God for a job. Now God is free to give him what he wants. So He manipulates certain events so that the man is soon able to land the new job. Prayer changes things. Prayer *determines* things.

Or a woman is sick. She prays half-heartedly that she may recover from her illness. But this vapid prayer is not enough to move God to intervene in her life and heal her. She is counseled by her pastor to pray with more vigor and to believe that if she does so God will restore her to health. She begins to pray with an emotional fervor, almost constantly, all the while believing in the "power of prayer." God sees this energy expended, is pleased, and because of this is moved to reward her with perfect health again. Prayer changes

things. Prayer *determines* things. Or so it is explained.

But the basic problem with this conception of prayer is that it conflicts with the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God. That God is sovereign means that God is free. He freely does whatever He wills. "Our God is in the heavens, he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased" (Ps. 15:3). This means that no one by prayer (or any other means, for that matter) is able to persuade or influence God to do anything. Our prayers do not determine things. If they did, God would no longer be free. Man would be able to influence God's will, change His mind, force His hand.

Prayer does not determine things. God determines things. In fact, He has done so already from eternity, sovereignly decreeing all things that ever should be. In Ephesians 1:11, God is revealed as the One "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." Things take place according to God's will, not man's will. Things are determined not by man's prayers but by God's sovereignly free eternal counsel. "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Is. 46:10).

Nevertheless, though prayer does not determine things, from a certain point of view it can be said that prayer changes things. Did we not already see that God is sovereign over all things? Our prayers are included in this. God has eternally decreed our prayers also. And it pleases Him to unfold His unchangeable counsel in time, i.e., change things, through our prayers.

What we mean can be demonstrated by example again. The man without a job is without a job because God determined from eternity that he would be and because God freely executed His counsel in the man's life, in His providence removing the man's job. God has also decreed that this man would soon have a new job. But God has decreed that the man would pray to Him for a job and that only in answer to this

prayer would he receive his new employment. In His counsel God has tied together, as it were, the prayer and the new job. The job cannot be had without the prayer.

So God unfolds His counsel in time with respect to the prayer as well. The sovereign God blesses the unemployed believer with the prayer. He works in his heart by the Holy Spirit, moving him to desire to pray, stimulating his faith so that he believes that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him, calling to his mind the promises of the Word and the Scripture's instruction regarding prayer, humbling him to place his will in subjection to his Lord's, and mysteriously even directing the very words that are uttered before the throne of grace. All this is the outworking of God's counsel as He, step by step, unfolds all that must take place in order to bring about the moment that this man receives notice that he is once again gainfully employed.

According to God's counsel, the prayer was required in order that the circumstances in the man's life be changed. The prayer was a gift of God to this believer and was used by God to bring about a change in the man's life. Prayer changes things, though God determines things.

It is also true, however, that not every request we make in prayer changes things in the way that we requested them to be changed. The apostle Paul requested three times that his thorn be removed, but nothing changed, the thorn remained. Or was there a change after all? Nothing about the thorn changed, but the apostle himself was changed. He went from one imploring the Lord that his thorn might depart from him to one glorying in that he had such an infirmity, even taking pleasure in all his infirmities in general (I Cor. 12:8-10). What a change God worked in him by those three prayers! Truly, prayer changes things.

This is also the teaching of our

Heidelberg Catechism in Question and Answer 116: "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him and are thankful for them." God will work changes in our life (the catechism mentions giving us His grace and Holy Spirit) in answer to prayer.

And this is the understanding of prayer that the Lord wants us to have too. He wants us to pray, truly believing that He will use our prayers to effect real change. This is the reason for the abundance of passages in Scripture that speak this way. For example, to list only a few: "ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7); "ask, and ye shall receive" (John 16:24); "what things

soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). In other words, when we desire a legitimate change in our life, and we pray properly for that change, i.e., asking in faith and submitting to God's will, God will work that change. Not a change, is this, from the point of view of God's counsel, but nevertheless a change from our point of view, a change in our circumstances as we live here below. This is God's sure promise expressed in the above passages.

Another outstanding passage setting out the efficacy of prayer is James 5:13-18. In verse 16, the Scripture says to us "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth (literally, *worketh*) much."

Here the Lord clearly speaks in this manner in order to encourage us to pray, to believe, if you will, that prayer changes things. Prayer changes things because our sovereign God has decreed it and controls it so to be. But God Himself says that our prayers avail much. What a comfort! What an encouragement to pray!

Let us be busy, then, in prayer. Not in order to convince God to do something or because we believe our prayers can determine things in our life. But because we believe in the sovereignty of God. Because we believe that God is sovereign over all things, including our prayers and the changes He will work through these prayers.



Rev. Ronald Hanko

Prayer and Fasting

Introduction

Since other articles in this special issue will be focusing on the nature and necessity of prayer, we will be focusing in this article on the relation between fasting and prayer. But because fasting is such a universally neglected Christian duty, we will have to show briefly the biblical warrant for fasting and the biblical information concerning fasting. We, then, echo Calvin in his *Institutes* who says:

Let me say something about fasting: because many, for want of knowing its usefulness, undervalue its necessity, and some reject it as altogether superfluous; while on the other hand, where the use of it is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition.

Fasting

Many Christians are under the false impression that fasting is an Old Testament practice that has no place in the lives of New Testament Christians. Few are aware that it is an important spiritual duty, and fewer practice it. Nevertheless, the Scripture has a great deal to say about it by way of recommending it to our use.

It is mentioned as a New Testament practice some 15 times. Jesus fasted (Matt. 4:2), the apostles fasted (Acts 10:30; 14:23; II Cor. 6:5; 11:27), and so did the early church (Acts 13:2, 3). It is spoken of both as an individual and private duty (Matt. 6:16-18; I Cor. 7:5) and as something that can be done by some or all of the members of the church together (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23).

Established as a legitimate New Testament practice, therefore, there is much that can be learned about it from the Old Testament. The difference between the Old and New Testament is only that in the New

Testament there are no set times for fasting (cf. Zech 8:19), but that does not mean that there is no place at all for fasting in our lives. It has or ought to have an important place. Jesus takes it for granted in Matthew 6:16-18 that we do fast, with the words "When ye fast..."

We should note that in Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus is not condemning fasting but the practice of the Pharisees who fasted for the wrong reasons and who made a proud public show of fasting by gloomy faces and dust on their heads. Indeed, in Matthew 6, fasting is listed with prayer and alms as the three great spiritual duties of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven: alms in relation to others, prayer in relation to God, and fasting in relation to ourselves.

Matthew 9:14, 15 might also be taken as speaking against fasting, but Jesus is not denying the practice altogether, only saying that there was no reason for His disciples to fast while He, the Bridegroom, was with them. In fact, the

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plain statement of Jesus is that when He is gone, there will be reason and occasion for His disciples to fast.

In describing fasting, Scripture speaks of shorter and longer fasts and of partial and full fasts. Many passages speak of fasting for a day (Jud. 20:26; I Sam. 7:6; II Sam. 1:12); others of longer fasts. Daniel fasted for three weeks (Dan. 10:2, 3), though his fast was only what might be called a partial fast, in which he ate no "pleasant bread" nor flesh, nor drank any wine. A full fast, in contrast, would involve complete abstinence from food.

Perhaps it should be added that fasting may never be used in such a way that one's health is damaged, since then our practice would conflict with the sixth commandment's requirement "that I hurt not myself, nor wilfully expose myself to any danger" (Heid. Cat., L.D. 40, Q. & A. 105).

The Purpose of Fasting

In order to understand the relationship between fasting and prayer it is necessary to understand the purpose of fasting. It has no merit in itself, and apart from its purpose it has no more spiritual value than dieting. That purpose is not, as sometimes suggested, to coerce or persuade God to do what we want and ask by abstaining from food. Nor is the purpose of fasting, as liberalism has it, to express unity with those who are impoverished and starving. Fasting has a deeply spiritual purpose. When one fasts, it must be to God (Zech. 7:5). It is this spiritual aspect of fasting that is emphasized in Isaiah 58:3-7. Without that spiritual purpose, fasting, like every other religious duty, is an abomination to God (Is. 1:13, 14).

The purpose of fasting is seen in such passages as Isaiah 58:3 and Psalm 35:13, which speak of afflicting one's soul, and of chastening or humbling one's soul. For this reason, fasting is especially appropriate in Scripture in times of repentance, of mourning, and of

great need. Joshua and the elders of Israel fasted after the defeat at Ai (Josh. 7:6); David when praying for his infant son (II Sam. 12:21-23); David and his men when mourning for Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 1:12); Daniel when confessing Israel's sins and praying for their deliverance from Babylon (Dan. 9:3); Nehemiah when praying for Jerusalem (Neh. 1:4); Ezra when in need of traveling mercies (Ezra 8:23); and the officebearers in the early church in connection with the ordination of missionaries and elders in the church (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). Joel speaks of fasting in connection with repentance (1:14; 2:15), and Jonah also (Jon. 3:5). Jesus speaks of fasting as part of our battle against Satan and his wiles (Matt. 17:21).

The duty of fasting, therefore, is part of self-denial and of the struggle against the flesh. It is an expression of our sorrow for sin, part of "keeping under the body and bringing it into subjection" (I Cor. 9:27), and a help in making sure that our belly is not our God (Phil. 3:19). It is for this reason that the prophet Isaiah recommends that other outward actions of self-denial and charity accompany fasting (Is. 58:6, 7). Fasting is of use in the battle against the flesh and for spiritual things both because it is itself an act of self-denial and because the hunger that fasting brings on serves as a constant reminder of the need for things more important than earthly bread. Abstaining from our earthly bread, we learn that man does not live by bread alone (Deut. 8:3). Indeed, God forced Israel to fast in the wilderness, "suffered them to hunger," that they might learn this important spiritual principle. We can learn the same principle in the same way.

Calvin says in his Commentary on Matthew 6, after reminding us that prayer is our most important duty:

It pleases Him up to a point, as long as it is directed to an end be-

yond itself, namely to prompt us to abstinence, to subject the lasciviousness of the flesh, to incense us in a desire for prayer, to testify to our repentance, whenever we are moved by the judgment of God.

Fasting would be appropriate, therefore, for individuals in connection with preparation for the Lord's Supper, when struggling against sin and temptation, when repenting sin, and in the face of death. It would be appropriate for the church when she is experiencing God's judgments, in times of apostasy, or when there is important work to be done in the church.

The Relation between Prayer and Fasting

That is the purpose of fasting, but fasting, in light of that purpose, ought always to be accompanied by prayer. The majority of passages that speak of fasting, therefore, speak also of prayer (II Sam. 12:16; Ezra 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Jer. 14:12; Dan. 9:23; Joel 1:14; Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29; Luke 2:37; Acts 10:30; 13:3; 14:23; I Cor. 7:5). These many passages demand an answer to the question: "What is the relationship between these two necessary and important spiritual duties?"

Fasting should ordinarily be accompanied by prayer, first, in order to insure that it not become a mere outward ritual that is done for unspiritual reasons and without profit. There is a great danger that an outward activity like fasting becomes an end in itself. Prayer insures that repentance, a sense of need, and the mortifying of the flesh are part of fasting. Also, in prayer the real purpose of fasting is reached, for it is not enough merely to mortify the flesh; the things of the kingdom must also be desired and sought, and that is done through prayer.

On the other hand, prayer without fasting can easily become a carnal and unspiritual activity. Fasting with prayer helps to insure that prayer not become a mere ex-

pression of carnal desires, a kind of spiritual shopping list. It helps to insure that the flesh, which is always present, does not gain the upper hand in prayer and that we do not think only of ourselves in prayer, forgetting in prayer God's name, kingdom, and will. It assists us in seeking the kingdom and kingdom righteousness and in trusting that all other things will be added to us (Matt. 6:33).

Prayer, when accompanied by fasting, is powerful, not in the sense that the abstinence from food forces God to hear and answer, but in that it helps us to pray the kind of prayer that is acceptable to God, prayer that is truly spiritual and in which we ask according to His will and from the heart, desiring above all else living fellowship with Him and the blessings of His grace. It is powerful in that it helps us to be spiritually minded before God.

This is the emphasis in Matthew 17, where Jesus talks about casting out devils through prayer and fasting. While there is no clear evidence that demon possession continued after the time of Christ and the apostles, and while the church does not practice exorcism anymore, the long warfare against Satan continues in the heart and life of every child of God. That warfare is fought principally through prayer, but as Jesus indicates, the faith that has the victory over Satan in prayer is often very weak and is not able to drive him away. Fasting, then, is a help, for it strengthens faith and makes it the kind of faith that moves mountains, though not because abstinence from food itself strengthens faith, but only because fasting mortifies Satan's ally, the flesh.

Prayer and fasting go together, therefore, prayer as the principal

duty, and fasting, when properly used, as a help to prayer. Arthur Pink sums this all up nicely when he says:

Though there is no express commandment in either the Law or the Gospel binding us thereto, yet it is plain both from precept and practice in the Old and New Testaments alike that there are occasions when fasting is both needful and helpful. Though there is nothing meritorious in it, fasting is both an appropriate sign and a valuable means. It should be the outward sign of an inward mortification. It is the opposite of feasting, which expresses joy and merriment. It is a voluntary denying ourselves of those creature comforts to which we are ordinarily accustomed. Rightly engaged in, it should be a valuable adjunct to prayer, particularly for afflicting our souls when expressing sorrow for sin. 

Rev. Daniel Kleyn

Special Days of Prayer

Prayer occupies a large place, not only in private and family life, but also in church life. Especially is that true in the worship services. But prayer also has an important place in Bible studies, lectures, and other meetings. In all these instances, the people of God are privileged to draw near to and speak with their almighty and loving heavenly Father.

In addition to this, however, provision is also made in the life of the church to have special days of prayer. This is mentioned in Article 66 of the Church Order, which states: "In time of war, pestilence, national calamities, and other great afflictions, the pressure of which is

felt throughout the churches, it is fitting that the classes proclaim a day of prayer."

These special days of prayer are to be distinguished from the Day of Prayer, which is observed once each year, in the spring, to ask for the Lord's blessing with a view to the planting and growing season. Special days of prayer, on the other hand, are observed on account of some great affliction that has occurred and which affects the churches and her members – such as war, earthquakes, floods, and so on. They are days similar to those that were observed in biblical times, as for example in the days of Nehemiah (Neh. 1:3, 4), and in the days of the early New Testament church (Acts 1:14; 13:3).

The Church Order states that the classis should call such special days

of prayer. This does not mean, however, that a consistory may not do so, or even a synod. The reason the classis is designated to do this is because the churches are divided regionally by classes. If, however, a calamity would be more local, affecting, for example, only one church, a consistory could call a special day of prayer for their particular congregation. And if all the churches were affected, a synod could do likewise for the whole denomination. It all depends upon the extent of the calamity, and on how many of the churches are affected by it.

Special days of prayer have not been held much in our churches. The only instance of which I am aware is when Classis West called for such a day after the terrorist attacks upon our nation on September 11, 2001, with a number of

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consistories in Classis East doing the same. But we know from Scripture that days of great afflictions, including severe persecution, are coming (Matt. 24). Especially then it may be very necessary for the churches to call and observe special days of prayer.



On special days of prayer, the church of Christ gathers for worship. This was the practice in the Netherlands, where the Church Order was written. Special days of prayer were observed especially during times of persecution. When the distress was severe, the congregation would sometimes come to church for most of the day. Two sermons would be preached. Between these sermons, Scripture would be read, the congregation would sing, and time would be spent in prayer.

The idea, then, of special days of prayer is that the consistory issues a call to worship. The congregation gathers to hear the Word of God preached. The minister preaches a sermon appropriate to the occasion, instructing the people of God concerning their response to the calamity that God has sent, and bringing words of comfort from the gospel. And, of course, prominent in the worship service will be congregational prayer, in which the needs of the church are brought to God.

It is certainly appropriate for the church to gather for worship and prayer on such occasions. By doing so, the church expresses her dependence upon God. To whom else could they turn in times of hardship and calamity than their heavenly Father? In prayer they cast their burdens upon Jehovah, knowing He will sustain them (Ps. 55:22). They pray because "the name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe" (Prov. 18:10).



Since prayer is our focus in this

issue of the *Standard Bearer*, we do well to consider in some detail what the substance of the church's prayers should be in times of great affliction and distress.

Proper prayer in times of calamity requires, first of all, an understanding and confession of the absolute sovereignty of God. The faithful church of Christ recognizes the fact that it is God who sends all troubles and calamities. He determines and controls all things. He governs and directs all that happens. Nothing comes by chance, but all things come from the hands of the almighty Lord of heaven and earth. And it is all sent by Him, not in some haphazard and purposeless manner, but wisely, at a specific time, and with a specific purpose.

As far as the wicked are concerned, God's purpose is to bring upon them temporal punishments for their sins. Through all the troubles and distresses that occur in this world, God punishes the wicked for sin. Few today will admit and say this. But the church must remember it, and should also rejoice to behold God's judgments in the earth (Ps. 97:8).

But the fact is that the church also suffers under these judgments of God. However, she knows, in her suffering, that these judgments are sent upon her as chastisements. The calamities come from the hands of her heavenly Father. They are sent in His goodness and love. They are for the spiritual and eternal good of His people.

The church of Christ therefore humbles herself under the mighty hand of God. She is, by means of God's judgments, made very conscious of her sins. She realizes she deserves to be punished for all her sins. But she also knows that she is delivered from all punishment through the blood of Christ. In the midst of great distresses, the church of Christ is thankful for her deliverance from God's wrath through the sacrifice and death of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.



Knowing and believing these things, the church and people of God utter spiritual prayers to God on special days of prayer.

The prayers of the church are not carnal and earthly. They are not prayers full of worldly concerns, such as the desire for world peace. They are not focused upon man and his happiness on earth. They are not prayers simply for things that would enable man to enjoy a life of ease and pleasure here below. That is, they are not merely requests for God to remove the trouble and to give relief.

The church knows that the judgments of God must and certainly will come upon the earth. She also knows that this will continue until the end of time, and will do so with increased frequency and intensity as the end draws near. And she confesses that Zion is redeemed through judgment (Is. 1:27).

The church does not attempt, therefore, to tell God what He ought to do. She does not ask God to change His plans and to do things differently. Nor does she hope (as many do today) that by having a large number of people praying to God, He will hear and do what we ask.

Rather, the spiritually minded church calls special days of prayer out of concern for the cause and kingdom of Christ. That is her chief interest and concern. It is true that she prays on such days for deliverance from adversity, if that is the Lord's will. But deliverance from the judgments of God is not her main desire. It is, rather, that God will glorify Himself by accomplishing His purpose to save and preserve His church. She is interested in the glory and praise of her God.



For that reason, the church prays for grace.

She prays for grace to submit to the will and way of God. She needs the grace of submission so that she

will receive the calamities as from the hand of her God and Father in Jesus Christ. She needs it so that she does not complain or become bitter, but instead knows and believes that God, whose ways are always much higher than ours, does all things for her blessedness and good.

She prays also for grace that she may seek the things that are above. It is so easy, in the midst of great distresses in this life, to become overly concerned, even distraught. The church and the people of God realize they are tempted to do this. They can be very earthly minded at times, and therefore see things from a very limited and earthly perspective. They pray for grace, therefore, so that they will view all things in light of eternity and the blessedness that is coming when this weary life is over.

The church also prays for the grace to bear up under the distress that God has sent. It is the desire and prayer of the church that God keep her faithful to Him. That grace is especially needed when the calamity that God sends upon the church is persecution at the hands of the wicked. She prays that God will protect her, and that He will enable her to shine as a light even in the midst of the darkness of affliction.

On special days of prayer the church urgently prays for the return of Christ and the coming of the end of the world. By the grace of God, she views the judgments of God as signs to her of the end of all things. She is reminded of that glorious day of Christ's return. The Spirit quickens within the hearts of the saints a longing for that day. Therefore the church

prays more earnestly, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!" She longs for the final manifestation of the kingdom of Christ, when God will be all in all.

By means of such prayer, the church of Christ shows her dependence upon God. She needs Him to uphold and preserve her in the midst of evil and distress. But she is not distraught. She prays in faith. She confesses that God is on her side, and therefore she has nothing to fear. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof" (Ps. 46:1-3). 

News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

Minister Activities

The Theological School Committee is presenting to Synod 2005 the following trio to replace Prof. D. Engelsma, who will be retiring as Professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament: Rev. R. Cammenga (Faith, Jenison, MI), Rev. S. Key (Hull, IA), and Rev. K. Koole (Grandville, MI).

Rev. J. Mahtani, our churches' eastern home missionary who has labored in Pittsburgh, PA since 1998, has accepted the call to serve as the next pastor of Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL.

Rev. S. Houck declined the call from First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada. First-Edmonton's new trio is Rev. W. Bruinsma, Rev. G. Eriks, and Rev. Doug Kuiper.

Mission Activities

The toll free number that the PR Fellowship of Fayetteville, NC has supplied for our denomination's eastern home missionary the last several years will follow Rev. Mahtani when he leaves for Bethel PRC. The Fayetteville Fellowship decided that this would be their ongoing contribution to the cause of missions in the PRC, so that parties in Pittsburgh and Fayetteville, and others in Allentown, Lanham, etc., can conveniently keep in touch with Pastor Mahtani.

The weekend of April 23, 24, Rev. W. Bruinsma and elder Dave Moelker, members of our Domestic Mission Committee, visited the Fayetteville PR Fellowship. In addition to renewing old contacts and visiting with the members of the Fellowship, Rev. Bruinsma was able to preach twice on Sunday.

Friday, April 22, Rev. A. Stewart, our denomination's missionary to the Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship in Northern

Ireland, spoke at the Rest Convalescent Home in Porthcawl, South Wales on the subject of "Total Depravity." Then one week later, on Friday, April 29, he gave a public lecture entitled "The 1000 Years of Revelation 20" in Mountjoy Orange Hall near Omagh, Northern Ireland, with 30-35 in attendance. Rev. Stewart planned to answer questions regarding what is the millennium or 1000 years, when does it start, and what is the binding of Satan.

The Covenant of Grace PR Fellowship in Spokane, WA gave a special welcome to Rev. Dale Kuiper, minister emeritus of our churches, and his wife in early May. Rev. Kuiper was scheduled to preach for the Fellowship for two Lord's days while Missionary Rev. T. Miersma and his family were on vacation and traveling to the Loveland, CO PRC. While there, Rev. Miersma planned to meet with the consistory as part of the regular supervisory work of the Loveland PRC.

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

Congregation Activities

A couple of our denomination's pastors celebrated birthdays recently. How do I know? Well, their congregations, Trinity in Hudsonville, MI and Grace in Standale, MI, invited their members for a time of coffee and cake to help celebrate the birthdays of their pastors, Rev. R. Kleyn and Rev. M. Dick respectively, after a recent Sunday morning service.

Sunday evening, May 1, Rev. A. denHartog was installed as the 12th pastor of the Southwest PRC in Grandville, MI. Southwest's 11th pastor, Rev. R. Cammenga, led the worship service, choosing as his text the Word of God found in Ephesians 6:19, 20 under the theme, "Pray for Him." Rev. Cammenga considered that text from three different viewpoints. Pray: For Whom? Pray: For What? Pray: Why? A welcome program for the denHartogs was held following the installation service.

Rev. denHartog preached his farewell sermon April 24 at Hope PRC in Walker, MI, the calling church for him as minister-on-loan to Singapore. An open house farewell for him, his wife Sherry, and their daughter Laura was held at Covenant Christian High School following the evening worship service.

A welcome for newly installed Rev. D. Overway, his wife Rebecca, and their family was planned for April 29 at the Doon, IA PRC.

The congregation of the Loveland, CO PRC was invited to join together on April 21 for their annual Spring landscape cleanup for their church and school. Loveland's members were encouraged to bring brooms, trash bags, and/or other tools to aid in the cleanup.

The help of all the members of Grace PRC in Standale, MI was needed on May 4 when their church sponsored their annual Spring cleaning bee. Help was needed for cleaning or baby-sitting for others. Members were asked to bring buckets, rags, and vacuum cleaners. All other supplies were provided.

Evangelism Activities

The Evangelism Committee of First PRC in Holland, MI sponsored their annual Spring lecture on Friday evening, April 29 at their church. Prof. H. Hanko spoke on the subject, "A Look at Bible Translations."

Denomination Activities

The Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, IN invited members of the vari-

ous PR congregations in the Chicago, IL area to a combined Junior/Senior Adult Bible Study on April 26. Discussion centered on the timely topic, "The Terri Schiavo Case and Christian Ethics."

The annual Ladies' League meeting was held April 26 in Doon, IA. Rev. D. Kleyn spoke on "The Role of Women in the Church's Work of Missions."

Young People's Activities

Thursday, April 21, the Young People of Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, MI hosted a Pot Luck dinner for their congregation. This dinner was advertised as an opportunity to support a good cause, while getting good food and enjoying good fellowship — a fine way to spend the dinner hour, AND the young people would even do the dishes.

The Young People of the South Holland, IL PRC were selling boxed KJV greeting cards as a fundraiser for this year's convention.

The Young People of Grace PRC in Standale, MI invited their congregation to a Mexican Supper, April 30, at Hope School. A delicious supper of nachos, burritos (hot or mild), and tacos was served.



Announcements

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Grandville PRC express their Christian sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. John Bouma in the death of John's mother,

MRS. GRACE BOUMA,

and also to Mr. and Mrs. Art Mulder in the death of Luanne's father,

MR. FLOYD ALLERS.

May they find comfort in God's word in Psalm 27:14, "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

Rev. K. Koole, President
Jack Brands, Assistant Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Grandville PRC express Christian sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Huizinga in the death of Bob's sister,

MRS. BEATRICE KOIENGA,

and also in the death of his brother

MR. JOHN HUIZINGA.

May the family be comforted from the word of God in Romans 6:5, "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection."

Rev. K. Koole, President
Jack Brands, Assistant Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Adult Bible Society of Faith PRC express their Christian sympathy to Fred and Ruth Hanko in the passing of his father,

REV. CORNELIUS HANKO.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isaiah 52:7).

Faith Adult Bible Society
Celia Feenstra, Secretary

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On June 20, 2005, our parents, **RICHARD and MARCIA FLIKKEMA**, will celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary, D.V. We give thanks to our heavenly Father for blessing us with God-fearing parents. They raised us in the fear and love of the Lord by giving us godly instruction and guidance. They also showed us, through their faithfulness and love to each other, what a God-fearing marriage should be. We will forever be thankful for the love that they showed us and for the sacrifices they made for us. Our constant prayer is that God will continue to bless and preserve us and our parents in the years to come as He has so faithfully done in the years past. May the words of their wedding text continue to ring true in their lives and in ours. Isaiah 26:3, 4: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD Jehovah is everlasting strength."

- * Dan and Tammy McHugh
- * Mike and Tricia Brummel
Drew
- * Joe and Heidi Kleyn
Makayla
- * Kyle Richard Flikkema (in glory)
Jenison, Michigan

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church expresses its sympathy with their fellow council member, Mr. Les Kamps, in the loss of his sister,

MRS. LAURIE BUITER.

"In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God" (Psalm 62:7).

Rev. Arie denHartog, Pres.
Mr. Gary Boverhof, Clerk

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

The Lord willing, on June 25, 2005, **GARY and JEANNE BUTEYN** will celebrate their 40th anniversary. We, their children, are grateful to the Lord for the blessing of having been raised in a covenant home. We want to thank them for their love, their spiritual instruction, and the many sacrifices they have made to teach us the fear of the Lord.

"The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel" (Psalm 128:5, 6).

- * Brian and Becky Buteyn
Derek, Lukas
- * Steve and Rachel Kooima
Travis, Jessica, Lindsay
- * Paul and Vanessa Buteyn
Hailey, Garret, Brody
- * Stephanie Buteyn
Randolph, Wisconsin

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On June 17, 2005, D.V., our parents and grandparents, **MR. and MRS. ELROY ALTEA**, will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. We praise and thank God for His faithfulness in their marriage and blessing them in these many years together. It is our prayer that our God will grant them more years together. "Great is the glory of the Lord" (Psalm 138:5).

- * Deanna and Rob Wynia
Jim, Bryan, Jesse, TaMae
- * Donna and Allen Kroeze
Dallas and Angela, Preston, Alicia
- * Dennis and Cindy Altena
Cody, Dillon, Shelby
- * Lorri and Lyle Meendering
Britni, Georan
Hull, Iowa

**2005 July
SUMMER CLASS SERIES**

***The Doctrine
of the Antithesis***
Prof. Herman Hanko

in Hope Church, Walker
on Tuesdays, at 7:30 P.M.

- July 5: The Idea of the Antithesis
- July 12: The Antithesis
in the Church
- July 19: The Antithesis
in Home and Family
- July 26: The Antithesis
in the World

Sponsored by
the Reformed Witness Committee
Hope Protestant Reformed Church
1580 Ferndale Ave. SW
Grand Rapids, MI 49544

For tapes of the series,
contact Wayne Bleyenbergh at:
wbbleyen@altelco.net

Please Note:

The *Standard Bearer*
will be published
only once per month
during June, July, and August.

REMINDER:

Pre-synodical service will be held
in Byron Center PRC on Monday, June
13, at 7:00 P.M.

Reformed Witness Hour

Topics for June

Love of Strangers, Brethren, Children

Date	Topic	Text
June 5	"Introduction"	Hebrews 13:1, 2
June 12	"Loving the Stranger"	Leviticus 19:33, 34
June 19	"Loving the Neighbor"	Luke 10:30-37
June 26	"The Great Woman of Shunem"	II Kings 4:1-37