

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer.

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No devout mind will ever question the absolute perfection of the prayer itself, seeing that it came from One with whom neither error nor flaw are possible. But we may legitimately question whether it was intended for the perpetual use of His people, and under all circumstances. Even that which is divinely excellent may prove injurious to the soul if wrongly applied. Spiritual intelligence in the ways of God is of the greatest possible importance to us all.

The Lord's prayer was admirably suited to the disciples in the position in which they found themselves as favoured with the personal presence of the promised Christ. He Himself emphasised the privileges of their position in Matt. 13: 16-17: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them," Others had looked and yearned for His coming; the disciples had Him before their eyes from day to day.

This being so, their experience went beyond anything known by Psalmists and Prophets, and this must needs be reflected in their prayers. But Christ not having yet died and risen again, and redemption being yet unaccomplished, the disciples were not in the marvellous position of blessing in which Christians now stand. Hence, while they could speak to God in a way that saints of earlier ages could not, they were quite unable to speak to Him as we can who are in the full grace and blessing of a perfect Christianity.

The prayer was thus suited to the intermediate or transitional condition of things then prevailing, and it will probably be found truly suitable again when Israel's believing remnant steps into our place of testimony after the Christian era is closed.

It is a fact to be noted that (leaving aside the Lord's prayer for the moment) no forms for use in approach to God, whether in prayer or worship, are ever suggested in the New Testament Epistles. Moreover, there is no reference whatever to the Lord's prayer after Pentecost. The Acts and the Epistles are alike silent as to its ever being used in the early Church. Why is this? The answer is very simple. This is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. He is personally present upon the earth while Christ is away. By His power the Church has been formed, and in it He dwells, for it is God's habitation in the Spirit (Eph. 2: 22). The living presence of the Spirit suffices for every need. He is perfectly able to furnish the suited language for every occasion. All that is needed is simple-hearted subjection on the part of those who are born of God. To no others could it apply.

Was the Lord's prayer meant to be a model or a form? Scarcely the latter, for then we should be obliged to ask which form we should use, seeing that in Luke 11 the prayer is given more briefly than in Matt. 6 (see Revised Version).* Moreover, the fact that the Lord has left the prayer in what some would consider an unfinished state has led to the unauthorised addition of the words "for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen," in order to render it suitable for congregational use. We suggest therefore that the Lord intended no more than a model of prayer for His disciples.

{*Taking into account the context in both cases, it is possible that Luke's shorter form was given at an earlier date than Matthew's longer form. }

True Christian prayer is in the name of the Son (John 16: 23-24) and obviously the Lord's prayer is not that. Prayer in the name of the Son is not the mere tacking His name to the end of our petitions; it is prayer in the consciousness that Christ by His death and resurrection has brought us into His own standing before God, accepted in His acceptance, blessed as He is blessed, and loved as He is loved. Praying in this happy consciousness, we expect the Father to respond to our requests according to His delight in His Son: with whom we are now eternally identified. Several years after the Lord's prayer was given, the Lord said to His disciples: "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." (John 16: 24). The whole context in John 16 shows that He was now leading them into a deeper privilege in connection with prayer than they had ever known before.

Let us now briefly consider the prayer itself in the fuller form of Matt. 6: 9-18. It may be divided into two parts: — the divine interests (5: 9-10); and the disciples' need (5: 11-13). "Our Father, which art in heaven." This is a distinct advance on anything previously known of God. The patriarchs communed with Him as the Almighty; Israel knew Him as Jehovah; but the coming into the world of the Only Begotten Son has brought out the sweet name of Father. Here then He is declaring the Father's name, as He says in John 17: 6-26. It is true that in Ex. 4: 22, Jehovah says, "Israel is My son, My firstborn," but that was merely a national relationship; while we have in the Lord's prayer is personal and individual. But Matt. 6: 9 falls far short of John 20: 17. There we hear the risen One announcing the fruits of His great victory thus: "go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." In Matt. 6: 9, there is no suggestion of identification with the Son; it goes no further than this, that men who had previously know God as Jehovah should now know Him as Father; John 20: 17 lifts us up to the Son's own platform of blessing. To His Father and God we are henceforward "many sons" (Heb. 2: 10) and to Himself we are many "brethren" (Rom. 8: 29).

A moment's reflection should convince anyone that it is perfectly shocking to teach a mixed company to say "Our Father." It is teaching them to utter the biggest of all falsehoods, to their own hurt and delusion. as well as to the divine dishonour. Though the Lord's prayer was uttered in the hearing of the crowd, the Lord was manifestly instructing His disciples only (Matt. 6: 1). In the words "which art in heaven," supplemented later by the title "your heavenly Father," the Lord was seeking to lead His disciples beyond Jewish hopes to relationships and expectations of an immeasurably higher character. As Jews, they followed Him with anticipations of an earthly kingdom; the Lord knew that no such kingdom was possible for the time being, and so in all His teaching He sought to prepare them for the heavenly unfoldings of Christianity.

"Hallowed be Thy name." Grace must not be presumed upon. He who has brought us wondrously near to Himself is our Creator and God. The deepest reverence becomes us in our every thought of Him, and with unshod feet we should draw near into His presence.

"Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven." Thus were the disciples (and we also) taught to desire that throughout the universe everything may be brought into fullest correspondence with the Father's character. This petition goes beyond the Millennium in its scope; not until the new heavens and the new earth appear will the Father's kingdom be fully established. We shall enter into the Father's kingdom as soon as we are caught up, and from thence we shall shine forth as the sun, as Matt. 13: 48 shows; but not until the Son of man has subjugated every foe will He deliver up the kingdom to Him who is God and Father, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15: 21-28). But realising, as we do, that everything here below is as wrong as it could be, we long, and we pray for, this blessed consummation. Meanwhile, we seek to be fully subject to the Father's will ourselves. Else, how could

we consistently take such a petition upon our lips? Thus the Lord teaches us that the divine interests should be uppermost in our hearts. But human need has a large and sympathetic place in the Father's heart, and so the disciples were taught to say next:

"Give us this day our daily (or sufficient) bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Thus both body and soul are considered in their various necessities. An aspect of forgiveness is here found which needs to be carefully considered. It is not sinners speaking to God, but disciples — children to their Father. The Gospel to the sinner speaks of forgiveness full and free in virtue of the Saviour's blood, nothing that the sinner can do having anything whatever to do with the matter; in Matt. 6: 12 it is the Father's government of His family, a different principle altogether. He expects to see in all His children a merciful spirit towards everybody. His own attitude towards men is to govern ours, and "He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5: 45). Those who do not cultivate this generous spirit of grace cannot walk happily with the Father.

It is interesting to note that while we read "debts" in Matthew, we have "sins" in Luke. Now Matthew's is essentially the Jewish Gospel. Most suitably therefore are the disciples taught to ask forgiveness for "debts." Did they not belong to a people who had long stood in special relationship with God, and who had grievously failed in the discharge of their obligations? (cp. Matt. 18: 23-35). Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, has Gentiles more particularly in view. They never stood in special relationship with God, but they were "sinners" indeed, if not exactly "debtors" as the people of Israel were.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Here we have the language of dependence upon God, and of utter mistrust of self. We may well deprecate being put to the proof, knowing how very frail we are. Both Job and Peter were thus tested, and how much badness came out in both cases, though the utterances of the patriarch are not to be compared with those of the apostle, if God is pleased to test us, then we may well consider ourselves "blessed" as James tells us in his first chapter, for God will not fail us, and He is well able to turn the painful experience to profitable account for our souls. But it is fitting that we should humbly pray that no such sifting may be our portion. Our Lord could meet the full power and deepest subtlety of Satan, as the story of the forty days in the wilderness shows; But we are not equal to these things.

Brief as the Lord's prayer is, it is wonderfully complete, as far as it goes. It takes into account both the divine interests and human necessities, physical and spiritual. It speaks of the realities of today, while looking onward to the final issue of all the ways of God in the new heavens and the new earth. We repeat, the prayer is complete, as far as it goes. It was the Lord's gracious provision for believers who lived prior to the accomplishment of redemption, who were therefore not in the blessed condition of having their consciences once for all purged from sins (Heb. 10: 1-2), and in whom as yet the Holy Spirit did not dwell. Indeed, in Luke 11: 13, immediately after the giving of the prayer, the disciples are instructed to ask the Father for this crowning endowment.

We look in vain in the Lord's prayer for any reference to the characteristic blessings of Christianity, and to use it habitually now is to put ourselves back into the dim light from which the death and resurrection of Christ has delivered us once for all. "Wherefore leaving the word of the beginning of Christ, let us go on to perfection" (full growth). (See Heb. 6: 1. R.V. margin.)