

Have you ever stopped to ponder (思考) God's holiness (圣洁) and His absolute glory? Often I find that ingratitude (不知感恩) starts entering into my heart when I allow myself to define God's goodness only by what He does for me because I deserve it. But what prayer according to God's Word does for the Christian is it reshapes the way we look at things. As a Christian, I begin to realize all the good that God has done *in spite* of me. We should be praying all the time, but I often find myself calling out in desperation (绝望) when I find myself at the bottom of a well, in some sort of mess that I made of my own doing. And He still picks me up, washes me off, and sends me out to give glory to His Name! That is grace!

In Psalm 50:14, Asaph calls on the people to: "Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." The Psalmist follows this line of reasoning in Psalm 16: 5-6 "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." Paul calls the Thessalonians to follow the pattern of the writers of the Psalms in I Thess 5:16-18 "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Of course, man is able to choose not to pray, but then this is the most supreme expression of his ingratitude. Romans 1: 21-22 reveals the opposite way of life: "because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile (无用的) in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools..."

We will see in this summary of the teaching of the Bible on prayer, the call to cry out to God first and foremost for God's grace and the Holy Spirit. We see King David do this when he falls into sin in Psalm 51:10-11 "Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." We live in a world full of sin and pain and we need the strength of God to stand firm before the pressures. We know that we need to pray for grace and the Holy Spirit to work for God's kingdom in this world, to advance the kingdom of King Jesus.

Hear the teaching of God's Word on prayer as summarized in the catechism (教理问答): The Lord's servants offer up their thanksgiving through prayer. We see in the pattern of Scripture that these prayers are offered up:

1. From the heart (Q&A 117a)
2. Before God's majesty (Q&A 117b)
3. Through Jesus Christ (Q&A 117c)

1. From the heart (Q&A 117a)

We learn three things about prayer under this first point. It must come from the heart, it must be offered to the only true God, and it must be done according to His Word.

A prayer that comes from the heart, simply comes from the heart. It should not be a mindless recitation of words. Even the Lord's Prayer can be said wrongly when it is memorized and we don't think about a single word we say. Prayer should not have vain repetition, sounding high and mighty, but utterly empty of meaning. It should not be for show as the Pharisees (法利赛人) who stand on the street-corners. This means that holy sounding words don't get any closer to God than any other words, unless they come from the heart. Public prayers must be done before the Lord and not for the praise of men. We see this throughout the Scripture in the prayers of Nehemiah, Solomon, David, and many others. David confesses in Psalm 16:2 "I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."

A prayer that comes from the heart is done before the one true God, who has revealed Himself in His

Word. It might sound foolish to say this in a Reformed Church, but it is necessary to remind ourselves of this in our century. Allah cannot hear the prayers of a Muslim, Krishna and Vishnu cannot hear the prayers of a Hindu. They are false gods. Our culture has softened Reformed Churches to this truth. We don't pray to other gods, but the question is: are we convinced that the God of the Bible is the only God to whom all men must call? We bring Christ to the cultures around us for the reason that we have in the catechism: we must pray to no other than the one true God. There is an absolute exclusivity (唯一性) in the Word of God. In Psalm 16:4, King David declares: "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips."

A prayer from the heart is done according to God's Word. The call to all men everywhere is to pray to the God of the Bible, and as Christians we must search His Word to know Him more. Our prayers should mature in humility as we submit ourselves to His Word. A prayer that comes from the heart also seeks to pray according to God's Word. This was the whole aim of the Reformation: to submit ourselves to Scripture once again. And that means our prayers must submit to the Word as well. Because we love God we want to submit our will to His will. That is why we say 'your will be done'. When we read about the nature and character of the living of God of all heaven and earth in the words of the Bible, we return to our prayers with a new understanding and zeal. We read His Word, so that we might know how to pray according to His Word: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." (James 1:5)

We have seen that prayer is done from the heart, but we also see that it is done

2. Before God's majesty (Q&A 117b)

When Isaiah is called to be a prophet, he first sees God's glory, and then he sees his utter helplessness. The pattern of the holiest men and women through Scripture is that they make themselves humble when they call on God. In Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah cries out after seeing the glory of God: "Woe *is* me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." In I Peter 5: 6-7, Peter calls the people to: "humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

Now, there is a very important point here. Who are you to humble yourself before? Sometimes Christians feel the need to show to each other that they are humble, or to humble each other. But the catechism says that we are called to be humble before God's majesty, or as we read in I Peter, to be humbled underneath the mighty hand of God. Public prayers in public worship are supposed to be done before God. Only when we have humbled ourselves before God, can we go out and serve in the Christian community in a God-glorifying way. No longer are we comparing ourselves to one another, or trying to show off (炫耀), but we are living life in the presence of a Holy God.

When you fully recognize the majesty and glory of God you will also realize your need and misery. We must recognize this in our prayers. Our tendency as sinful people is to feel self-righteous (自以为义) and to shake our fist in God's face. But we also see this recognition of need and misery in many of the prayers of King David. When he recognizes his need and misery, then he is forgiven. When he is weak before God in his prayers, then he is strong in the presence of men. When he becomes proud before God, then his weakness comes out on public display. In the power of the Holy Spirit, David speaks the Word of God in Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite (痛悔的) heart – these, O God, You will not despise (轻看)." The prayer of the Christian when he realizes that he is broken and in need of grace, is this: "O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise."

We have seen that prayer is done from the heart, it is done before God's majesty, and now we see that it is done:

3. Through Jesus Christ (Q&A 117c)

Although we do not deserve it. We do not deserve it. In Psalm 16:1-2, King David says: “Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust. *O my soul*, you have said to the Lord, 'You *are* my Lord, My goodness is nothing apart from You.’” David realizes that even his best deeds are dependent on God. His good deeds are worthless without the sovereignty of God.

Isn't this ultimately the basis for all our prayers? We pray, you are my lord, my battles against addictions (上瘾), my struggles to walk in the Christian life are nothing apart from You. God's servants often come to Him with struggles and temptations (试探), daily afflictions, and they should ask that God would break the power of sin in their lives. But this can be done only on the basis of the promises in your baptism (洗礼), on the basis of Jesus' blood and righteousness (义), not on the basis of anything that you have done or on the basis of anything outside of the Lord's character.

And so the Catechism teaches us that God will hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord as He promised in His Word. In John 14:13-14, we read: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do *it*.”

As adopted (被收养的) sons and daughters, you are able to come before the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is crucial, because there is a lot of legalism (律法主义) when it comes to prayer in the Church. It is quite common for people to think that all their problems will be fixed by reading their Bible more and praying more. But this is what prosperity (成功神学) preachers do. They turn a good thing into the basis for receiving good things, when the only basis is the goodness of God. You are not saved by your Bible reading and prayer, you are saved by Jesus Christ. When He saves You, it only makes sense to pray and read your bible.

When you open the Scriptures, you will find the Person of Jesus Christ. When you find Him, prayer is not just something you do once or twice a day because people have guilt-tripped (负罪感) you into thinking that prayer will solve all your problems. Rather, when you find Jesus Christ, you will want to establish a relationship with Him. Think of a family relationship. If you love your best friend, you will want to talk to him or her. In our relationship with the Lord of the universe, he commands us to call on Him, but it is also our chief act of thanksgiving. The key is that sometimes it takes work to pray, but we *want* to have this relationship because of the work of the Holy Spirit, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fact that our God is a very good father. We want to because He has saved us from our sins!

Still, the problems in your life don't just go away. But prayer expresses that bold confidence and trust of the Psalmist in Psalm 16: “Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol (阴间), or let your holy one see corruption (朽坏).” Even when you are hauling a massive cross behind you, you can express a firm confidence and trust in your prayers, that because of Jesus death, there is also resurrection. It might be in this life but ultimately in heaven, because in Jesus Christ, there is resurrection (复活).

Conclusion:

True prayer, to the living God, in humility, on the basis of God's Word, in the Name of Jesus Christ will be heard by God even when it is prayed from the deepest darkest slum (贫民窟) or the deepest darkest halls of politics or the business world. Even a criminal on a cross is granted his petition (祈求) when he believes in the Name of Jesus Christ. Jesus accepts a teacher in Israel who sneaks (悄悄进入) in by a back way in the middle of the night. Jesus does not recognize status (地位), intellectual ability, business credentials (资历, 证书), but a broken and a contrite spirit, the Lord will not despise. So come to Jesus Christ. Open up your heart and your soul in prayer. C.S. Lewis

once wrote: "I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice (使满足)?" Like the Psalmist, you are able to open up your anger, your sorrow, your grief too Him. And yet, the call is: "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (Thess 5:16-18) Amen!