

# Prayer or Pressure?

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## **Introduction**

“Prayer changes things” is a popular catch phrase encouraging Christians to pray. It represents a popular view which claims that God will answer all prayers if they are issued in great faith. Faith or the conviction that God will answer your prayer becomes the deciding factor for answered prayer. It implies that unanswered prayer is the result of a lack of faith on the side of the one who prays. Of course, the undesirable end is that some might blame their unanswered prayer on the lack of love or power on the side of God. This inevitably will lead to the renouncing of the Christian faith. What immaturity! Is this what prayer is all about - pressuring God or bending his arm to get what you want? I am sure prayer has greater depth than sheer consumerism.

## **The Goal of Prayer**

What does our Lord teach about prayer? The clearest passage that can enlighten us concerning the goal or purpose of prayer is recorded in Luke 11: 1-4, “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

‘Father  
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
for we also forgive everyone who  
sins against us.

And lead us not into  
temptation.’ “

The context of the request is certainly *discipleship*. A disciple wanted to learn how to pray so that he could be a better disciple of his master as did the disciples of John the Baptist. This explains the length, breath and width of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus’ answer to the disciple’s request.

Christian prayer is thus about participating in the mission of Jesus. Prayer is the *struggle* and *strategy* of discipleship. Prayer means both *asking about* the will of the Triune God and *acting out* the will of the Triune God. The “Lord’s Prayer” identifies Jesus, his mission for the sake of the kingdom of God, and the community of disciples which share in his mission.

1. In giving his disciples the “Abba” name, he gives them his destiny and his mission. The name expresses the oneness in mission of Jesus and the “Father.” It is their utter commitment to giving themselves for, on behalf of, the world (John 15: 14-17 NIV).
2. “Thy name be holy; Thy kingdom come” are based on the *Qaddish*, the conclusion of the synagogue service. “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.” But now, in the prayer of Jesus, “the two petitions are eschatological,” that God’s name be honoured *now* and that God’s kingdom *be revealed*.<sup>1</sup> It is

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cry from the depths - from those who know that God’s name is *profaned* wherever there is abuse and oppression of people, wherever there are acts of terror and reprisal, wherever there is injustice and hopelessness, wherever there is inequity between the rich and the poor. To pray these petitions means that we take God’s promise seriously, that we live in the time when the turning point has already *begun*...

3. Jeremiah argues that in Aramaic the prayer for “the bread of the morrow” which is to be received already today is about the

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1967), p. 98.

Eucharist. But if one works only with the Greek text, it is still eschatological. Perhaps, given the eschatological outlook, it would not be wrong to take it to mean “*Give us only what we need today, for tomorrow the kingdom will be consummated!*”

4. With forgiveness, the prayer refers both to sins and to debts. The “jubilee year” (Leviticus 25<sup>8-17</sup> NIV and 23-25 NIV) means that slaves are to be set free, land is to be returned to original owner, debts are to be cancelled. We *anticipate* the “jubilee year,” that is, the eschaton, and with it God’s final forgiving verdict by our own forgiving.
5. But just such forgiving will be under assault by the powers of the “old age,” where defence and protection rather than vulnerability and forgiveness have the rule. C. S. Lewis observes that the powers of the “old age” regard forgiveness as contemptible, not noble.<sup>2</sup> We pray to be saved from or in the time of assault upon us *because* of our witness to the kingdom of God.

The entire “Lord’s Prayer” is thus about being disciples in view of the eschatological coming of the Reign of God. *It is a prayer to share in the mission of Jesus.* There is much more to pray than the answer-my-wish concept. Prayer lets us in on the mission of God, helps us feel the heartbeat of God and share in the Father’s passion. Prayer moulds us into what God wants us to be and makes what is the Father’s ours. And this results in the Christian living for God by doing his will.

## **Prayer In the Name of Jesus**

Jesus said, “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:13-14 NIV).” If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer (Matthew 21:22 NIV).”

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), p. 104.

The “name” of Jesus literally means “*The Anointed One.*” It speaks of Jesus’ *mission* as the *Messiah*. Therefore the “name” of Jesus means Jesus’ *way of being in the world*. Jesus calls the One in whose mission he participates “Abba.” He gives himself and is given by his “Father” into his messianic mission even to death. Jesus confers on those who trust him, who confess him as Messiah, the right to name his Father “Abba.” They are children as he is Son. They are let in on Jesus’ mission. Therefore they are permitted to call that One “Father” whose mission they share with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-17 NIV).

To pray “with faith” (Matthew 21:22 NIV) means to *trust* Jesus’ way of being in and for the world. To believe in Jesus means that our *wantings* will change. There are some things that cannot be requested “with faith.” Mark Twain wrote *The War Prayer*, published after his death, to put into words what is unspoken in prayers for victory in battle. That prayer cannot be prayed “in the name of Jesus.” The model is Jesus’ praying in Gethsemane. Jesus would not pray for his not dying on the cross. “Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’ ” “He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’ ” (Matthew 26: 39, 42 NIV).

## **Luther’s Explanation to the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism**

Luther’s explanation to the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism involves our *acting as a dimension of our asking*<sup>3</sup>. It is Luther’s way of affirming the discipleship context of Christian prayer.

Luther asks, “What is this?” after the first petition.

Answer: “To be sure, God’s name is holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may also be holy for us.”

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<sup>3</sup> The catechism was written by Martin Luther and was printed in May 1529 for instruction of children for confirmation. It has five main sections: The Ten Commandments, The Creed, The Lord’s Prayer, The Sacraments, and The Supplementary Parts.

Then Luther asks, “How does this come about?”- a most important question. Answer: *by things that we do!* “When the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as children of God, also live holy lives in according to it.”

The pattern is repeated. That we forgive is so important that in the Large Catechism Luther writes:

If you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven. ... God has set up this condition for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise which is in agreement with this petition.... Whatever can be effected by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which are appointed as outward signs, this sign [forgiving] also can effect to strengthen and gladden our conscience.<sup>4</sup>

According to Luther, the prayer of Christ’s mission plunges us into struggle.

1. We need courage for the known will of God.
2. We need to struggle for clarity when the will of God is not evident or clearly known.
3. The Gospel confers both the courage to act and the community within which the struggle can occur.

Our struggle is our prayer. And God’s “answer” is that we are set free by the Gospel to serve the kingdom of God. That service to the kingdom of God is the way God “intervenes” in history. We are the way God is now involved in the course of history. The risk of God is that we are entrusted with the witness to the kingdom of God in our words and deeds, in our being and doing. Hence to ask “in faith” (that is, wanting to serve the Reign of God) means that we will get what we want.

Even though we do not always see clearly, faith in the Gospel frees us to “sin boldly, that is, not to be immobilised by the ambiguity of the world in which the new age clashes with the old. “The divine commission to

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<sup>4</sup> The Large Catechism was written by Martin Luther and was printed in 1529. It was a manual for teachers teaching children for confirmation. It corresponds to the Small Catechism. Theodore Tappert, Tr. & ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 433.

which Jesus devoted his life was not related to a secluded religious community, but to the world, i.e., to every single human being, and it related to the world in order to proclaim the advent of the kingdom of God as the ultimate future of all humanity.

In the eyes of Luther, prayer is the gift of God's grace, the means given to a person that he may come to live according to God's will... Only when there is prayer can there be right action, that is, not action in the sense of legalistic fulfilment of isolated precepts, but action as the expression of love for him with whom we speak as children to a father.<sup>5</sup>

## A "Thorny" Example

Paul's "thorny" problem is a classic example of what has been said about prayer. Three times Paul pleaded with God to remove it (2 Corinthians 12: 8). But to no avail. The situation remained. God did not turn it around. Paul's prayers did not change his desperate situation. God's answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 9)." Paul's prayer did not change anything! Yet Paul was not defeated! For Paul, there was greater depth to prayer than just getting a sheer "yes" from God. In recounting his ordeal, he "defended" his unanswered prayer: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, messenger of Satan, to torment me (2 Corinthians 12: 7 NIV)." Whatever the revelations might be, the point is that Paul now knew why God did not answer his prayer. God had other plans for him! Paul's prayer did not change his situation but change *him*. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardship, in persecutions, in difficulties. For I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12: 9b-10 NIV). There was no indication in all the writings of Paul that God had removed the thorn. But there were numerous evidences that Paul was changed by God.

He was changed and made *fit to do God's will*. Paul's mission was no child play. He said, "... I have worked much harder, been in prison more

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 1: 200-201

frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews, the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked....(2 Corinthians 11: 23-27 NIV). He speaks not as one who has succumbed to crises but as one who sits above them. He was made fit to do the will of his Father.

## **The Starting Point of Prayer**

The chief reason accounting for a lack of understanding and confusion concerning Christian prayer has much to do with its wrong starting point. The starting point of Christian prayer is our *love for God*, the greatest commandment according to our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 22:34-39 NIV). This is another way of looking at the goal or purpose of Christian prayer. If love for God is the starting point of Christian prayer, then all prayers ought to be prayed in submission to God's will, according to his heartbeat, fired by his passion and to magnify his holy name. If this is so, then, "...hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" must come to the foreground. Christ's mission or the Reign of God in all hearts, present (spirituality of believers and evangelising of unbelievers) and future (the eschaton), must be the hub around which our prayers revolve. Such prayers anticipate changes in the lives of the one who prays. Like, Paul, the request no longer takes centre stage. The one who prays does. It is here that one learns to give up one's will and let the Holy Spirit take over. If our prayer is answered, then it is well and good! But, sometimes, our circumstances do not seem to change even after prolong praying with great fervour. We find ourselves at wits end and do not know how to pray anymore. This is when the "Holy Spirit can intercede for us with groans that words cannot express (Romans 8:26)." This is *when we let go and let God rule*. This is when his will becomes our will. This is when we become the person he wants us to be. This is

when we are made fit and ready to do his will wherever he places us. This is when he increases and we decrease. The work of prayer is far more important than its answer! But that does not mean that there is no place for asking in our prayer. Interestingly, Paul, despite his “thorny” experience, encourages the Philippian Christians to bring their requests to God, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your request to God (Philippians 4:6 NIV).” We still need to bring our needs to God. This is an act of trust and submission to the sovereignty of God. But, we come with an open mind for God to speak to us and work in our lives. We come with an open mind to *seek* God’s will for even the *most obvious* things such as asking for healing of terminal illness and for a job to sustain our family. It is an act of faith to bring forth our petitions to God. It is an act of greater faith to accept the situations that remain unchanged. The starting point of prayer is our love for God. Our love for God tells us that he is not toying with our lives as a captor toys with the life of his captive. According to the prophet Jeremiah, God is the potter and we are the clay. He is constantly moulding us into what he desires us to be (Jeremiah 18:1-6 NIV). There is nothing, no joy whatsoever that can be compared to being found pleasing to God and doing his will.

## **The Back-To-Front Prayer**

This is when love for self becomes the starting point of our prayer. God is placed on the centre stage. He is being “observed” for his faithfulness to give and power to act. The Christian’s will becomes the goal of prayers. Career path, academic excellence, wealth, health, family and success are the focuses of prayers. Not that these are unimportant or unnecessary, but they must not become the all or none in prayer. They must not be the goal or ultimate reality or experience in prayer. To this group of Christians, God’s goodness and power are directly proportionate to the number of prayers he answers and how best he answers them. If there is any spirituality, it would take its shape and form from such “Santa Claus” perception of prayer. So how in sync a Christian is with his God depends on the number of prayers God answers and how spectacularly he answers them. Anything otherwise would suggest that there is something amiss in the lives of that Christian. God’s *glory* is greatly emphasised at the expense

of his *cross*. Suffering has no place in such theology of prayer. This is understandable because love for self is the starting point of prayer. Unanswered prayers bring suffering, as such, suffering has no place in the economy of God for such Christians. They fail to take into account that we are living in a sin-torn world and in a sinful body with our sinful nature trying to have the better of us and sometime it does. How can we be sure that all our prayers are rightly motivated. James says, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you have on your pressures (James 4:3 NIV). It is pathetic to believe that there is nothing left or good to be found in unanswered prayers. That prayer is meaningful only when it is answered. The Christian can end up resisting the will of God as he vents on doing his (the Christian’s) will. Thinking that his will is God’s will for that matter, missing the wood for the trees. This often ends in the clashing of two wills, resulting in frustration, disillusion, bitterness, rebellion and even turning one’s back on God. It can be quite presumptuous to think that when God answers our prayers we will love him more. If the starting point of prayer is love for self, then answered prayers would only cause us to love our self more. The test of a Christian *is not* how faithful his God *is* to him. For his God is already faithful to him when he sent his Son to die on the cross for his sin. He (God) *is* and *has been* faithful to his children even before they are faithful to him. God is not on the centre stage, but the Christian is. The test of a Christian is on how much he *loves* his God and how *faithfully* he lives his life for him under *all* circumstances. As parents desire their children to love them for who they *are* and not for what they *can* give them, similarly, our God desires us to love him for who he *is* to us and not for what he *can* give us. It would be sad when Christians love the gift more than the giver (God).

## **Rethinking Our Prayer Meeting**

It seems almost a sure thing that most prayer meetings are geared towards the praying for needs. We pray for needs of individuals to those of the church, and of para-churches to those of missions. There is certainly nothing wrong with that. But, it would do the church and individual Christians a disservice when this *sets* the tone and direction for the prayer ministry. Perhaps, in the light of what has been said, the emphasis should

be on *listening* more than on asking. Asking should be a secondary aspect of the prayer ministry, whether of the church or the individual. Prayer meeting ought to be more reflective and meditative than a one-way communication of emotional verbalisation. In this way, prayer meeting would be meaningful in good times and bad times. There will always be an urgency to pray. Otherwise, there is urgency to pray only when one faces a crisis. When Christians gather to pray because they want to be faithful disciples, sharing the mission of their Lord, then, slowly but surely, prayer ministry would have direct bearing on the life and witness of the church. Prayer ministry will turn Christians into faithful disciples of our Lord, living for him and passionate in doing his will. In this way, we will raise Christians with great spiritual depth which will translate into love, humility, faithfulness, sacrifice, perseverance, and courage to “hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Lately, intercessory prayer group has become a common feature of many churches. It is usually comprised of the faithful praying Christians of the church. They are usually given a long list of prayer items to pray for. But intercessory prayer ministry may not necessarily mean bringing your concerns to God *only*. Rather it can mean finding yourself in the heart of God, and then discovering what is God’s heart for you and for others.<sup>6</sup> This, I believe, is the first work of prayer.

Singapore is a go-getting society. Our government has effectively social engineered the national agenda onto the mind and soul of Singaporeans. But as Christians and faithful disciples of our Lord, we must be *discerning*. We must not confuse it with our Christian calling. We must not blindly direct our prayer resources in that direction and making it the goal of Christian prayer. The goal or purpose of prayer is not to give God a list of assignments. The goal of prayer is to *change* us. There are plenty of things to pray besides what we want God to do for us. Prayer is the process of aligning our wills, our attitudes, and our perspectives with God’s. True Christian prayer does not demand but submit to the will of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased quote from Eleanor Abarno.

## Conclusion

As vulnerable Christians, we must be careful to discern the mission of the Christian Church from the pursuit of our secular and materialistic society. Let us not *confuse* the “*carrying*” of the cross which our Lord calls all his disciples to in Luke 10:23 (to suffer for him) with the “*wearing*” of the cross” (to beautify or glorify ourselves). Prayer is meant to let us in on the mission of Christ, serving him as faithful disciples and is not meant to drive us deeper into the world our Lord warns us to shun in 1 John 2: 15-17. Prayer is *not pressuring God* to give us what we ask for with our great faith. Prayer is *to bring our whole life under the reign of God*.

Therefore, in the final analysis, prayer *does not* change things or circumstances *all* the time but it *does* change the Christian *all* the time. Sometimes, God changes things or circumstances because he wants to change us. But, other times, he does not *also* because he wants to change us. For the goal of prayer is to make us into God-loving, man-loving and faithful disciples, engaging in his mission to do his will.

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