

THE PATTERN PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

We have observed the prayer life of our Lord Jesus through the eyes of an unnamed disciple who was watching him pray. As we looked together at Jesus praying, I hope there stole over us, as there did over this unnamed disciple, a dawning conviction that prayer was the secret of this amazing life, that it was both the most natural and a most necessary aspect of his existence. I hope, too, that each of us echoed and are echoing yet today the urgent, clamant cry of this disciple, "Lord, teach us to pray."

In answer to that request Jesus gave them what is called *The Model Prayer*. We have a very brief account of it in Luke 11, Verses 2-4.

And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be thy name. thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation." {Luke 11:2-4 RSV}

You will note this is slightly different from the more familiar form in Matthew which was undoubtedly uttered on a different occasion. (Jesus frequently repeated certain of the great truths that he gave during his ministry.) In either form, the Lord's Prayer is large enough and great enough to encompass the whole of our lives. It is like a mighty rainbow that spans our years from birth to death and gathers up into one all the varied colors of our lives.

This prayer falls into two rather obvious divisions, highlighted by the use of two pronouns:

- The first part centers on God, using the pronoun *thy*: "Thy kingdom come. Hallowed be Thy name."
- The second part concerns man and here the pronoun *us* occurs: "Give us our daily bread; forgive us our sins; lead us not into temptation."

We are presently going to confine ourselves to those first three utterances that center around the person, character and being of God. It is no accident, I am sure, that Jesus invariably puts prayer in this form. He puts the things concerning God first. Surely this exposes a fatal weakness in our own prayers, which so frequently begin with us. Is this not our trouble? We rush almost immediately into a series of pleading petitions that have to do with our problems and our needs and our irritations, and this serves to focus our attention upon what is already troubling us and to increase our awareness of our lack. Perhaps that is the reason we frequently end up more depressed or more frustrated than when we began. But Jesus shows us another way. We must begin with God. We must take a slow, calm, reassuring gaze at him, at his greatness and his eagerness to give, his unwearied patience and untiring love. Then, of course, the first thing we receive in prayer is a calm spirit and there is no need for us to plunge in panic into a flood of words.

This is why this pattern prayer begins with a word of relationship, "Father." May I point out that it is "Father," not "Daddy-o"! There is a reverence about the word *father* that is totally absent in some modern expressions of fatherhood and surely this is the note our Lord intends for us to capture as we begin our study in this prayer. It is essential to know to whom we are praying. We are not, when we come to prayer, talking about God. We are not engaging in a theological dialogue. We are talking with God. We are going to converse with him directly and so it is very essential that we understand to whom we are speaking. Our Lord gathers it all up in this marvelously expressive word and says true prayer must begin with a concept of God as *Father*.

Immediately that eliminates a number of other concepts. It shows us that prayer, real prayer, is never to be addressed to the Chairman of the Committee for Welfare and Relief. Sometimes our prayers take on that aspect. We come expecting a handout. We want something to be poured into our laps, something that we think we need, and in making an appeal we are but filling out the properly prescribed forms.

Nor is prayer addressed to the Chief of the Bureau of Investigation. It is never to be merely a confession of our wrong-doings, with the hope that we may cast ourselves upon the mercy of the court. Nor is it an appeal to the Secretary of the Treasury, some sort of genial international banker whom we hope to interest in financing our projects. Prayer is to be to a Father with a father's heart, a father's love, and a father's strength, and the first and truest note of prayer must be our recognition that we come to this kind of father. We must hear him and come to him as a child, in trust and simplicity and with all the frankness of a child, otherwise it is not prayer.

Someone has pointed out that this word *father* answers all the philosophical questions about the nature of God. A father is a person, therefore God is not a blind force behind the inscrutable machinery of the universe. A father is able to hear, and God is not simply an impersonal being, aloof from all our troubles and our problems. And above all, a father is predisposed by his love and relationship to give a careful, attentive ear to what his child says. God is this way. From a father, a child can surely expect a reply. Our Lord goes on to teach us more of what a father is like in the parable that follows this prayer, and the point of it is surely that God is interested in what we have to say. A father, therefore, may be expected to reply to us.

We are not only to address God as *Father*, that is, simply taking the word upon our lips, but we are to believe that he is a Father, for all that God makes available to mankind must always come to us through faith, must always operate in our lives through belief. Belief invariably involves an actual commitment of the will, a moving of the deepest part of our nature. Therefore when we come to prayer, if we begin by addressing God as "Almighty God," or "Dreadful Creator," or "Ground of all Being," this betrays our fatal ignorance or unbelief. The greatest authority on prayer says that God is a father!

Someone has suggested that we can combine the extremes of theological persuasion evident in our country today with this prayer: "May the Ground of Our Being bless you real good." Such a prayer is absurd, of course. When I come home I do not want my children to meet me in awe, and say, "Oh thou great and dreadful Pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, welcome home." It would be an insult to my father-heart. I want my children to greet me as a father. It is never prayer until we recognize that we are coming to a patient and tender father. That is the first note in true prayer.

The second is one of surrender, "Hallowed be thy name." I am quite sure this is the petition that makes hypocrites out of most of us. For we can say "Father" with grateful sincerity, but when we pray "Hallowed be thy name," we say this with the guilty knowledge that, as we pray, there are areas of our life in which his name is not hallowed and in which, furthermore, we don't want it to be hallowed. When we say "Hallowed be thy name," we are praying, "May the whole of my life be a source of delight to you and may it be an honor to the name which I bear, which is your name. Hallowed be your name." It is the same thing we find in that prayer of David's at the close of one of his great psalms: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer," {cf, Psa 19:14}. That is praying "Hallowed be thy name."

The trouble is that we so frequently know there are great areas of our life that are not hallowed. There are certain monopolies which we have reserved to ourselves, privileged areas which we do not wish to surrender, where the name of our boss or the name of our girl friend or some other dear one means more to us than the name of God. But when we pray this, if we pray it in any degree whatsoever of sincerity or openness or honesty, we are praying, "Lord, I open to you every closet, I am taking every skeleton out for you to examine. Hallowed be thy name." There cannot be any contact with God, any real touching of his power, any genuine experiencing of the glorious fragrance and wonder of God at work in human life until we truly pray, and the second requisite of true prayer is that we say "Hallowed be thy name."

But we are not only aware that in each of us there are areas where God's name is not hallowed, where he cannot write his name, but furthermore we are aware deep in our being that none of us can make our lives like this, that no matter how we may try to arrange every area of our lives to please him, there is a fatal weakness, a flaw that somehow makes us miss the mark. Even when we try hard we find ourselves unable to do this. But you will notice that this prayer is not phrased as simply a confession or an expression of repentance to the Father. We are not to pray as so frequently we do pray, "Father, help me to be good," or "Help me to be better." Is it not rather remarkable that throughout this whole pattern prayer, not once do you ever find an

expression of a desire for help in the sanctification of life? That which is so much our concern, and so much the concern of Scripture, is never once reflected in this prayer. No, Jesus turns our attention entirely away from ourselves to the Father. This phrase, "Hallowed be thy name" is really a cry of helpless trust, in which we are simply standing and saying, "Father, not only do I know that there are areas in my life where thy name is not hallowed, but I know also that only you can hallow them, and I am quite willing to simply stand still and let you be the Holy One who will actually be first in my life." When we pray that way, then we discover that the rest comes by itself, so to speak.

The man who lets God be his Lord and surrenders to him is drawn quite spontaneously into a great learning process and becomes a different person. Martin Luther once said, "You do not command a stone which is lying in the sun to be warm. It will be warm all by itself." When we say, "Father, there is no area of my life that I'm not willing to let you talk to me about, there is no area that I will hide from you, my sexual life, my business life, my social life, my school life, my recreation times, my vacation periods," that is saying, "Hallowed be thy name." When we pray that way we discover that God will walk into the dark closets of our life where the odor is sometimes too much even for us to stand and clean them out and straighten them up and make them fit for his dwelling. "If we walk in the light," John says, (and that is not sinlessness, that means where God sees everything), "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin," {1 Jn 1:7 RSV}.

The third cry of true prayer, again concerned with God, is a cry of hope, "Thy kingdom come." Now this can be a sigh for heaven. Who of us does not get homesick for heaven once in awhile, longing to be free from the desultory humdrumness of life and to experience the glory we read of in the Bible. Or this can be, as it ought to be, a cry heaven to come to earth. That is, "Thy kingdom come," meaning, may the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. This is which we sing in the hymn, *Jesus Shall Reign*,

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

There is much in Scripture about this, and who of us does not weary of the sickening senselessness of war and poverty, and misery and human despair, and long for that day to come when God shall rule in righteousness over all the earth?

But I think this prayer is more than that. It is more than a long, wistful look into the future, whether on earth, or off earth. It is a cry that God's will may be done through, and by means of, the blood and sweat and tears of life, right now. That is, "Thy kingdom come through what I am going through at this very moment." That is what this prayer means. Scripture reveals to us a truth that man would never know by himself, but which becomes self-evident as we look at life through the lenses of the Word of God, and that is that God builds his kingdom in secret, so to speak. When it is least evident that he is at work this is frequently the time when he is accomplishing the most. When we are least aware of his working, looking back, we see that this was the time when he was doing the most extensive work of all. Behind the scaffolding of tragedy and despair, God frequently is erecting his empire of love and glory. In these trials, hardships, disappointments, heartbreak and disasters, when we think God is silent, and we have been abandoned, when we feel God has removed his hand and we no longer sense the friendship of his presence, God frequently is accomplishing the greatest things of all.

A few days ago I sat down with a young man who told me the story of his life. He had gone through a fearsome accident which had left a physical mark upon him, but a broken marriage had caused an even deeper scar. He had been raised in a church environment and, before some of these things took place, his outlook was one of self-righteous judgment of others, sort of a pious disdain for those who could not keep free from troubles or problems. But he said, "You know, the humiliation of my divorce cut the ground right out from under my self-righteous attitude. I know that I never would have come to my present joy and understanding of God's purpose if I had not been a divorce statistic." It is through these ways that God builds his kingdom.

What a glorious mystery this is!

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are filled with mercies,
and shall break In blessings 'round thy head.

Is there any liturgy or ritual of the church that says this more eloquently to us than the Lord's Supper? Here we gather for the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine, each of which is a symbol of the pain, anguish and sorrow, and the bitter, bitter death that our Lord went through. But, as Cowper writes,

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Out of darkness God calls forth light, out of despair, hope. From death comes resurrection. You cannot have resurrection without death, hope without despair or light without darkness. By means of defeat, the kingdom of God is born in human hearts. This is what this prayer means.

"Oh, Lord, I am but a little child. I do not understand the mysteries of life. I do not know they ways in the world of men, but Lord, I pray that through these very circumstances in which I now find myself, through these present troubles, these present struggles, thy kingdom come."

The transmuting element is prayer, simple childlike, trustful, rising out of the helpless need of a child to touch a father's heart.

Prayer

Father, how frequently we misunderstand life even though you have been at such great lengths to show us the secrets of it. How many times, Father, have we rebelled in some foolish resentment against you and your workings in our lives? How many times have we turned away in disgust or despair or bitterness? And yet, have we not also seen that through these hours of resentment and burning shame and bitterness, you have been at work in love to teach us the truth and to bring us to an understanding of reality, to bring us back to your loving heart. Lord, we pray this great prayer Jesus taught us to pray, Father hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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