

Effective Prayer

Clearly, one of the most essential elements in all religions is prayer. Wherever people sincerely acknowledge the existence of God and have some sense of their dependence on Him, they turn to Him and supplicate for protection, guidance and blessing. And yet, because many misunderstand what prayer is for, what it is meant to achieve, and the way to go about it, they become disappointed with the results. They feel that they are getting nothing out of it and that it gets them nowhere. Possibly one of the most widely-held ideas concerning God is that He can be moved to change His attitude towards us, and prayer is looked upon as being the means by which, eventually, a message can be got through to Him, subsequent to which He will stir Himself into action on our behalf. And if He doesn't; if God doesn't do what He has been asked in prayer to do; people question His interest in them, and even come to think of Him being uncaring and unjust.

And this, in turn, points to two things:

Firstly, if we would use Prayer to its best advantage, we must understand what it is, and what it is intended to accomplish. It stands to reason that if I use an implement, or a tool, for a job it was not made for, most times I am going to be disappointed with the result. In the same way, if I make demands of Prayer, or expect things of it, for which it has not been given nor is it able to supply, I am going to be disappointed in that also. The fact is that things are expected of Prayer; things which it was never intended to accomplish. We need be in no doubt whatever about the vital role that prayer can play, but it is important that we understand the function it was meant to serve.

Secondly, concerning the way in which our thought about God influences the way we look at, and use prayer. If, for example, we think He can be influenced in our favour by different ways and means; if indeed we think He sits back waiting to be so influenced; then obviously we shall use prayer for that purpose - to try to influence God's thinking to grant us some favour or to act on our behalf. A very limited idea of God gives rise to a very limited idea of prayer. And this makes us realise that prayer is not something that can be considered in isolation, alone, and by itself. A proper understanding of prayer rests - and effective use of it rests - in our having a correct idea of the nature of the Lord and of the goals to which He is looking to His government of human affairs. Of this, therefore, something needs to be said, first of all.

In creating the universe, the Lord had no other goal or purpose in mind than a heaven of angels from the human race. From love and from His desire to bless the lives of others with heavenly happiness, the Lord created and creates. And in everything He does, at every step of His Divine Providence, the Lord aims for the successful accomplishment of that purpose. Every person who is born into the world is predestined for heaven. And the Lord's government both in and over human affairs is wholly geared to that end. There is not one fraction of a moment when He is not working with us to bring this about. If, as it is said, we could see but a tiny glimmer of what the Lord is doing on behalf of every person's salvation, we would be amazed. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3854, 5992, 8391). He is on hand, anticipating every change of state and mind we come into. He is at work, beyond our immediate consciousness, in the innermost recesses of our minds, bending us in the direction He would have us go, and bringing to bear what good influences it is possible for Him to direct onto us.

In thousands and thousands of unseen ways, the Lord is working for our spiritual and everlasting happiness and well-being. One can never say that at any moment He changes in His attitude towards us. He is unalterably the same - a God of infinite love, tenderness and mercy, Whose supreme concern is that we should be happy to all eternity. And He will not change or be influenced, nor does He need changing or influencing in His attitude towards us. Let's completely remove from our thinking any idea of a God who needs prompting into action and who is waiting upon our prayers.

The Lord is doing more for us, at this very moment, and at every moment, that we can possibly comprehend. In no sense whatever does He need urging to do more.

Man cannot change God. And this point needs stressing many times. He is unalterably the same towards us, and provides for us every moment. He knows far better than we do the things that are good for us. To think of prayer then, as a means by which we might influence God is wrong. Prayer is not for that purpose. As it was once said: "The Prayers of the universe could not change the purposes of infinite love, the methods of infinite wisdom, or win a more prompt and favourable regard or tender and helpful service from the Lord, than He constantly accords us." (Rev. Chauncey Giles, "*Perfect Prayer*", P.30.)

Inevitably then, the question arises, "Why pray?" If the Lord is unalterably the same towards us, is there any purpose in praying? What can it do - or help to do - that is not already being done? Despite all that I have said about the Lord's care; about His guidance, protection, and blessing; what He does for us is nevertheless limited in its effectiveness to what we ourselves want.

The Lord takes infinite care over our lives, and strives to guide and protect and bless us, as has been said. But the extent to which He can do this is, at least in some respects, up to us. For example, though the Lord wishes to deliver us from our evils He cannot do so unless and until we ourselves make up our minds that we so want to be delivered. Of necessity we must actively want and in prayer ask for these things first. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 376). And this highlights the essential and most important function that prayer serves. Rather than being a means by which we might reach through to and influence God, which they are not, **prayers are a means by which we open the door and allow God to reach through to and influence us.** In reality, and basically, this is what they are intended for.

This applies not only to our deliverance from evil and to matters of that nature. It applies to all things we pray about. We pray in times of family difficulties and for our children. We pray for peace and marriage happiness. We pray at a time of crisis and decision-making. And indeed we should. The fact that we pray opens our minds to new thoughts and inspiration which flows in, from above, about it. If we take a genuine concern about others, to the Lord, new ideas as to how we might help them are opened up to us. Again, if we have seemingly insurmountable problems and difficulties, prayer can have the effect of reducing them to their correct perspective, and of being a channel through which encouragement can reach us as to how best they may be overcome. Swedenborg was given to write on this matter:

"Prayer, regarded in itself, is talking with God . . . to which there answers something like an influx into the perception or thought of the mind, so that there is a certain opening of a person's interiors towards God; but this with a difference according to the man's state, and according to the essence of the thing which is the subject of the prayer". (*Arcana Caelestia* 2535).

Of course, the Lord, does not speak to us in so many words, and tell us what to do. But He does give us hope, and inspiration; and He also arouses within us affections of what is good and true in a way that, without prayer, He would never have been able to do. Prayer is also the time when, if we give Him the opportunity to do so, the Lord can re-awaken our memory of Biblical teaching and concepts we have learned such as would cause us to modify feelings and expectations we have, either those we have at the time we are praying or about which we are, in fact, praying.

Clearly, though He needs time to do this. And this points to the near uselessness of a prayer which is a one-sided conversation with us rapidly reciting the things with which we are pre-occupied and then leaving it at that. Full stop, as if that's the end of it all. Prayer, however, is not just a matter of talking to the Lord. It is a matter, rather, of talking with the Lord. It involves us visualizing Him before our eyes and our coming into a consciousness of His teaching and example - a consciousness which will become more real as we pray.

It is, as we noted, widely and wrongly thought that prayer is to be resorted to as a means of getting through to, and influencing, God. The truth is that our prayers, if sincere, is God's opportunity to get through to and to influence us. And, realising this, what prayer is for, we have no difficulty with the much misunderstood words of the Lord, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13). Because what we will be asking for are the changes in ourselves the Lord is wanting to bring about. Whatever we ask of Him in this regard, "He will do it".

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