

## **The Lord's Prayer (1)**

The best known and most frequently used Prayer we have is the Lord's Prayer recorded in Matthew's and in Luke's Gospels (though a slightly different version). If it is repeated at all regularly a person can expect to say it thousands of times during their life time. It is constantly used in worship and at meetings and we invariably use it in our private devotions.

What sets it apart is the fact that it was actually formulated by the Lord. In Luke's Gospel we are told that the disciples had come to the Lord asking Him that He would teach them to pray, as John the Baptist had previously taught his followers to pray, and the Lord responded by directing them to pray in this way. In Matthew's Gospel we have the Lord teaching on prayer generally before giving the Lord's Prayer. And since that time, that Prayer has featured in practically all forms of Christian worship and devotion.

But constant use, in itself, holds a danger for us. The repetition of the Prayer can become little more than mechanical, well remembered words, as indeed they are, springing quickly to mind and falling from the lips without the application of thought which they demand and deserve. It is possible for us to become insensitive to the meaning which the words we know so well embody and convey.

This is the first in a series of talks on the Lord's Prayer; a series in which the various petitions of the Prayer will be examined as to what is meant and being prayed for. All prayer opens up a channel of communication with the Lord. All prayer, sincerely offered, opens our minds to the influences which He yearns to bring to bear upon us. But no prayer does this more effectively than the Lord's Prayer. It is a wonderful vehicle both for communicating with the Lord and making it possible for Him to communicate with us, and all too easily we underestimate its great usefulness to us. I shall be examining the petitions of the Lord's Prayer especially in the light of the teachings and explanations given about them in the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg.

From those writings we learn some interesting things about the Lord's Prayer generally which I would like to mention first of all. We are told those in heaven say it daily (*True Christianity* 113:6). And there is no question of it being unmeaningful

repetition there! The Lord's Prayer is such that one can never exhaust its meaning. There is, and always will be, something new to be got from it; something we haven't seen before; some implication it carries of which we have not previously been aware.

"There are" wrote Swedenborg "more things in the contents of that Prayer than the universal heaven is capable of comprehending: and with man there are more things in it in proportion as his thought is more open towards heaven." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6619). And from his own experience, Swedenborg spoke of the new light which was shed on the various petitions each time he said it. (*The Spiritual Diary* 258) "Wonderful to say" he wrote "the things which inflowed were varied every day." (*Arcana Caelestia* 6619).

These talks on the Lord's Prayer will be based on the version of it which is given in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 6, verses 9 to 13. It reads there, "Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

Here then is how the Lord would have us pray, after this manner, in this way. Here in the Lord's Prayer are the essential elements of effective prayer. And we notice it begins by focussing our attention on Him to whom we are to pray. Prayer must be addressed to someone. Here the Prayer is addressed, "Our Father, who art in heaven." "A very exact translation of the Greek words here is "Father of us, the One in the heavens".

I think it probable that we fail to realise what an impact on the disciples this image of Divine Fatherhood, this concept of a tender parent-child relationship which these words embody, must have had. For the fact is that until the Coming of the Lord, God was thought of as a remote and awesome Being, as a stern Judge and Dispenser of justice. People never thought of approaching Him but with sacrifices and offerings. Their minds were filled with notions of His ability both to bless and curse. But here all this is changed and an entirely new relationship is spoken of. God is presented to us in an entirely new light. In uttering these words a bond is forged with which everyone can identify. By saying them we acknowledge God as the Author of our existence and acknowledge ourselves His children. Within the expression there is implied, indeed there is held out to us, the wisdom and guidance, the forgiveness and kindness, and

the counsel and forbearance we justly and rightly associate with such a relationship.

And who of us can fail to notice the significance of the comprehensive "our"? The Prayer doesn't begin with the words "My Father", but with the words, "Our Father". And here again there is involved a profound break with the old thinking; the thinking which made God the exclusive property of one nation or one people. This is what the Jews had thought. But God is the God of all peoples, and all people are His children, whether Jew or Gentile, African or European, Christian or Moslem. We inadequately and insincerely say these words, "Our Father", unless we truly believe that this is so.

But though we speak of God in this way, who is He of whom we are speaking? Is it the principal Person in a trinity of Gods, or what? Who is "Our Father who art in the heavens"?

There is only one God and He is the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, in Christ, as the Apostle Paul so rightly said, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form " (Colossians 2:9). With the birth of Jesus the one, indivisible God of heaven and earth became incarnate, and one of the reasons for that incarnation was that men should henceforth visualize Him and think of Him in human form. The Divine creative life and activity which is God, the everlasting Father, was within and worked through that human nature born of Mary, to bring about redemption and to provide for the continuing possibilities of mankind's salvation. And this is why Christ could say, "I and the Father are one " (John 10:30). And, in response to Philip's questioning, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9). In other words, to see Jesus Christ was to see the Father in bodily form. They are not two Gods, but one God in one Person, as the soul and body make one man in one person. The risen Lord Jesus Christ is Almighty God in the human form.

These words, "Our Father who art in the heavens", especially mean the Divine Itself in human form, the Lord God Jesus Christ. He is the object of our prayers and He to whom all devotion should be directed. We are looking to the Lord Jesus Christ, to God in His human form made divine, as the author of Life, as the Father of our being.

He created us, formed us in the womb and predestines us to heaven. His supreme concern is for our eternal welfare and He is watching over us all the time. Moreover, even as He is the Author and Source of our life in a physical sense, He is also the

Author and Source of our spiritual life, of all that is good and true present with us. And these things should be present in our minds, infilling us with humility as we think about them, when we say "Our Father who art in the heavens".

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