

PRAYER: OUR CONNECTION TO THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

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Introduction

“Prayer...is speech with God” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535). Prayers occur throughout the Bible; nearly all of the Psalms are prayers. Jesus Himself prayed while on Earth, in many ways, and for many things, the most prominent example being in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 15:32-41). Although prayer plays an important role in the Biblical accounts, and has an important place in our religious life, it can often seem that our prayers don’t have much impact. We may feel that we are engaging in “vain repetitions” (Matthew 6:7), that God already knows what we want, or that prayer doesn’t work anyway, at least not right away or when we most need it. The perspective that God will do what needs to be done on His own is somewhat ridiculous if taken to its logical extreme, as C.S. Lewis points out, “Why wash your hands? If God intends them to be clean, they’ll come clean without your washing them. If He doesn’t, they’ll remain dirty...however much soap you use” (Lewis, 105). A similar example is cited in the *Writings*. “Man himself ought to purify himself from evils [and not wait for the Lord to do this without his cooperation, see n. 331]. Otherwise he would be like a servant, going to his master, with his face and clothes befouled with soot or dung, and saying, “Master, wash me.” Would not his master answer him, “You foolish servant, what are you saying? See, here are water, soap, and a towel; have you not hands of your own and the power to use them? Wash yourself.” Therefore, the Lord God will say, “These means of purification are from Me; and your ability to will and do are also from Me; therefore use these My gifts and endowments as your own, and you will be purified” (*True Christian Religion* 36). This is where seeing the spiritual role of prayer helps us understand why it is such an important part of the life of religion.

The Word tells us, “Ask and it shall be given unto you” (Luke 11:9). However, it also says that we are not to worry about what we shall eat or wear, for the Father knows what we need (Matt 6:31-32). So a key passage here is, “If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” We may note that the Lord’s prayer says, “*Thy will be done.*” The focus of prayer should be on seeking the Lord’s will for our lives, and not merely asking Him to confirm what we want. People often emphasize the *asking* part of prayer, without considering the *listening* part, or the *action* that is required to fulfill the prayer. Prayer is speech with God, but conversation is a two-way street. “[H]e who does not acknowledge the Divine of the Lord in His Human, and pray to it, cannot have conjunction with heaven” (*Apocalypse Explained* 805). The Lord is always with us, conjoining us to heaven through Himself and our associate spirits, but He cannot effect conjunction unless we invite him to do so through prayer. When we pray, honestly seeking the Lord’s will, we are allowing the Lord to bring heaven closer to us through direct influx, associate spirits and spheres.

In the end, of course, prayer is about life. All our prayers are of no avail if we are unwilling to make changes in our lives to align with what the Lord wants for us. Praying for riches without being willing to work is not sincere or useful prayer. The Word tells us that “Divine worship consists primarily in the life of charity and secondarily in prayers” (*Apocalypse Explained* 325). Note the emphasis here. Our lives influence our prayers as much as our prayers influence our lives, so it is important to ensure that we don’t let prayer become something that happens only in our heads. “[T]he use of prayer is to ask and hear how we may do the Lord’s will, so it only follows that actually *doing* the Lord’s will is regarded as worship” (Childs, 8).

Prayer and Associate Spirits

Associate spirits are one of the two ways that the Lord is able to lead and guide people while they are in this world. He flows into us as much as we are able to receive Him, which is called direct influx, but He also attempts to reach humans by indirect influx, through associate spirits (*Heaven and Hell* 297). The reason that angels and spirits are so close to humans is that there is a close union of the spiritual and the natural in each human mind. Because people have separated themselves from heaven, the Lord provides associate spirits so that humans can be reached through them (*Heaven and Hell* 247).

Man needs associate spirits because of the indirect influx they provide, but spirits need people as well. Spirits, particularly those in the world of spirits, need the minds of men as a way to experience life. Spirits newly arrived in the other world still see earthly things as symbolically important, and need our natural thought to be able to experience ideas and sensory memories. As spirits progress to more interior states, their natural memory becomes quiescent, and they no longer need human memories (Odhner, 70). Thus, the spiritual relationship between humans and spirits is a beneficial interaction for both parties.

Heaven and Hell 292 tells us that everyone has both good and evil spirits associated with them at all times. These spirits are from the world of spirits, which is between heaven and hell. Spirits from hell are attached to people because people are born into evils of every kind. In order to maintain the spiritual balance that allows people to choose good or evil, the Lord also provides that we be associated with good spirits. These spirits are always kept in perfect equilibrium; when good spirits draw nearer, so too do evil ones (*Heaven and Hell* 293).

The kind of spirits associated with any person is determined by the person's affections and loves. The Lord Himself sends the good spirits, while people invite evil ones (*Heaven and Hell*

295). These spirits constantly offer humans affection for both what is good and true and what is evil and false. Humans are able to choose which spirits influence their thoughts and affections, based on their own thoughts and affections. If a person's thoughts and affections agree with the affections of the associate spirits, those affections will influence him or her. The thoughts and affections that people accept from associate spirits actually become a part of them (*Heaven and Hell* 298).

Since the spirits around us are drawn to us by our thoughts and affections, we can change our associate spirits by consciously changing our thoughts and affections. First, of course, we can un-invite evil associate spirits, since we are the ones who invited them in the first place. Second, we can align our thoughts and affections with heaven and the Lord so that He can send us good associate spirits.

When we pray from sincere love and faith, we are asking the Lord to show us how we can align our lives with His will. Of course, the Lord already knows what we need before we ask. In *AR* 376 we read: "It is common in all Divine worship that man first will, desire, and pray, and the Lord then answer, inform and do; otherwise man does not receive anything divine... The Lord gives them to ask, and what to ask; therefore the Lord knows it beforehand; but still the Lord wills that man should ask first, to the end that he may do it as if of himself, and thus that it should be appropriated to him; otherwise, if the petition in itself were not from the Lord, it would not be said in those places, that they should receive whatever they asked."

The Lord is waiting for us to acknowledge, as if of ourselves, that we need His help. As theologian and philosopher Blaise Pascal put it, "God instituted prayer to allow His creatures the dignity of causality." We have to feel like our desire to change, and our need for God's help, comes from ourselves. The Lord says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My

voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). When we, through prayer, open the door to the Lord’s knocking to see and acknowledge that we need the Lord, He can flow in with love and wisdom from Himself both directly and through associate spirits. But we must make the first move.

Prayer and Spheres

Spheres are the environments that are around us, either as a result of our own thoughts and affections at the time, or the thoughts and affections of the people around us. All of us have experienced both good and bad spheres or “vibes”, such as when we meet someone who is either genuinely happy or in a terrible mood.

A person’s sphere is created by spiritual associations, and is the same as the sphere of the spiritual society with which the person is associated. The startling truth is that no one actually thinks from him or herself, but from the influence of societies in the other world. This is not to say that a person’s thoughts and affections are actually from a spiritual society: they are entirely his/her own, but the sphere of the society influences their quality. (Acton, Wynne, “Spheres.” *New Church Life*. Vol. 77; 1937). When we choose to associate ourselves with a good spiritual society, we will be more likely to feel the Lord’s influence on our lives; if we choose to associate our thoughts with evil societies, we will find ourselves inclined toward our hereditary evils. No matter what spiritual company we keep, we still think from ourselves but good spiritual company will make good states easier to choose.

A person is always free to choose between good and evil when he sees that there is a choice. Often, however, people feel “captivated” by a mood or sphere that is difficult to shed. This mood may produce a sense of irresistibility, or powerlessness to

make either the good or the bad choice. While it appears that these moods or spheres are due to physical occurrences, they are actually a result of people's inner states (Odhner, 66). These states can be from ourselves, or can come to us by association with the states of those around us. A motivational speaker may make us feel empowered to change our lives, while angry rock music may make us feel helpless and frustrated with our lot. In either situation, we are still free to choose our state, but choosing a good environment, both spiritually and naturally, makes choosing a good state a lot easier.

As human beings with free choice, we are responsible for modulating our states, which we can do either consciously or unconsciously. Whenever we change state, we are also changing associate spirits (Odhner, 69). A simple way to change our state is to change the people we are with, or the place and situation in which we find ourselves. Committing a random act of kindness for someone else can bring a happy state. In addition, we can change our spheres by reading the Word and by asking the Lord to lead us into good thoughts and affections. We accomplish this through prayer, both spoken and acted. It is the Lord who provides that associate spirits be with people, but since spirits are responsive to state/sphere, people are responsible for the type of good spirits who are able to be with them (*Arcana Coelestia* 5979).

When a person prays, there "comes forth in the prayer something like a revelation (which is manifested in the affection of him that prays) as to hope, consolation, or a certain inward joy" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535). The revelation is due to a change in state that allows greater reception of the Lord's direct and indirect influx. The hope, consolation and comfort that the Lord gives in response to prayer comes from the fact that we have allowed Him to turn our minds in the right spiritual direction. Swedenborg himself described a change in his sphere when he

said the Lord's Prayer. While saying it, he was received into a higher/more interior sphere, and was able to clearly perceive the interior things of the prayer (*Spiritual Experiences* 210).

How to Pray

While in the world, the Lord prayed both publicly and privately, and for Himself, for His disciples, for the sick, for protection and many other things. The Lord's life on Earth gives us a model of how to pray, and what to include in our prayers. He also gives us the Lord's Prayer as an example of how we ought to pray (Matthew 6:9-13).

Ritual Prayer

Ritual prayers provide a backbone, or jumping off point for our personal prayers. Ritual prayers are useful in guiding our thoughts, especially when spontaneous prayer does not seem to flow naturally. Consider the Lord's Prayer as an example: We are reminded of the role of God as a Father, and as holy. We see that prayer strives for conjunction of heaven and earth, "As in heaven so upon the earth." We ask for daily bread, or the spiritual truths and guidance that we need each day, as well as for forgiveness and the ability to forgive others. We then ask for protection from future evils and temptations and conclude with a reminder that it is God, who is powerful, not we ourselves (Matthew 6:9-13). This is the ideal prayer, but as a personal prayer, we should flesh it out with specific problems that we require deliverance from, specific truths we need or acts that need forgiveness. By adding our own requests to prayer, we can feel the presence of the Lord in every aspect of our lives.

Ritual prayers are valuable, especially those from the Word, because they provide us with a reminder of what we should be asking for. The danger, of course, is vain repetition, where we mouth the "magic" words and hope that just saying them will

bring us what we want. External worship alone is not the way to create vibrant dialogue with God: Most people at this day believe that they are to come into heaven solely by virtue of holy worship in temples ...but do not care for the knowledge of truth and good from the Word, and ...fail to imbue with these the life, as well as the memory, remain natural as before, and do not become spiritual; for their holy worship, adorations, and prayers, do not proceed from any spiritual origin”(*Apocalypse Explained* 126).

While mindlessly saying a prayer from scripture will affect our associate spirits, it will not influence our lives very noticeably. It is important to avoid making mere repetition a habit. Regular, sincere prayer, whether spontaneous or from the Word, is essential to spiritual life, and there are no excuses for repetition due to laziness or bad planning. Imagine telling the King of Heaven that you don't have time for Him today! Instead, we must invest ritual prayers with meaning for our lives.

Petitionary Prayer

Prayer is a way to express, as if of self, our desire and need for conjunction with God and heaven. *What* we are asking for is not as important as *why* we are asking, and *how* we respond to the answer. Thomas Moore writes that the importance of prayer is not that it “works” but that, “Prayer makes us holy. It represents our awareness that we live in...two universes: the world of the senses we control...and the world of mystery and timelessness that far transcends our abilities. By keeping these two universes connected, prayer makes holiness possible” (Moore, 250).

The most common type of prayer is probably petitionary prayer, because we humans want things. For example, we want to be safe and we want those we love to be safe; we want good weather, good grades and good things. Asking God for things is not wrong; after all, He is the Ultimate Provider. Unfortunately,

the answer to our asking for specific things is often, “No”, or “Not now”. This is not an answer we like to hear. Sincere prayer, however, remembers that it is God’s will that is important. Even when we don’t get what we want, God can give us a better understanding of what we really need. Almost all of us can recall asking for something that we did not receive, only to find later that we got something even better, or that what we asked for wouldn’t have been good for us.

Sometimes, all we really need is time. We must wait on the Lord, to allow temptations to pass, and to allow the Lord to work in our lives. Even though the answer to prayer may feel like, “No,” it is actually, “Not yet.” This should not be considered wasted time: “[M]an is not ready for this new state...His progress is held back in mercy. Man may have free choice but—fortunately—the Lord rules the circumstances” (Odhner, 68).

Prayer for natural things must be tempered with a remembrance that what we really need are not things to eat, wear, or have. We read that, “If [a] man prays from love and faith, and for only heavenly and spiritual things, there then comes forth in the prayer something like a revelation (which is manifested in the affection of him that prays) as to hope, consolation, or a certain inward joy” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535). Does this mean that we can or should pray only for spiritual things? No, it means that we ought to remember that while we may want the weather to be nice *tomorrow*, the Lord is looking to our *eternal* well-being. The most important prayers we will say are about spiritual things, but most things can become more spiritual through prayer. As we pray for good weather tomorrow, we can realize that what we want more is for our friend to have a beautiful wedding tomorrow, and a happy marriage after that. This could lead us to pray for our friends marriage, and for a good attitude toward our own marriage, which are spiritual things. By praying for natural things, we align our thoughts with

heaven and the Lord will be able to show us what we need to pray for spiritually. While praying for natural wants is useful, we must remember that we are to, “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added” (Matthew 7:33).

Other Prayers.

Prayer is not just about asking. If prayer is speech with God, it should not be one long wish list, or a recitation of the things in our life that we want the Lord to change for us. Speech involves thinking, thanking, praising, laughing as well as scolding, yelling and crying. The purpose of prayer is to yank us out of our self-absorption. It calls to mind the fact that life is not just about what we want for ourselves, it is about what we can give to others by following God’s voice. The Lord knows what is best for us, but He is waiting to see whether we have the “as of self” desire and determination to follow through and do the work that is needed to make our requests a reality. Prayer signifies our desire to make a change, with the Lord’s help. The story in Numbers 14 of Moses ‘convincing’ God not to slay the Israelites is a great example of this. Moses was in fact the person who was burningly angry with his provoking followers. But the Lord waits until Moses sees for himself and then communicates to God the need for mercy before He “agrees” to pardon the Israelites. Moses is the one who needed to grow in this situation and through prayer, he did.

Petitionary prayer is usually the most spontaneous; we remember God when we are forced to see how much we need Him. Consequently, people pray when they are angry, scared and depressed. These prayers are not bad, because it is always good to recall how much we need God. The best sort of prayer is when we involuntarily remember that we need the Lord’s influence in our lives. This is as simple as taking a mental break to say, “Thank you, Lord, for the ‘A’ on this test. Please help me remember to use *all* knowledge for Your glory.” No situation is

so good that we don't need to remember God, and to allow Him to be the source of our actions.

Prayer comes in many forms, spoken, sung, unspoken. Prayer is often used in rituals like church, meals, weddings and funerals, as well as privately. The most important thing for an individual is not when, where or how one prays, but that one prays regularly and sincerely. Maintaining a daily dialogue with God allows us to invite spheres and spirits, insights and answers that we cannot receive just by checking in once a week on Sunday.

Life and Prayer.

“All religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do good” (*Life* 1). To be effective, prayer should not be kept in a separate mental compartment, away from the rest of our lives. Prayer should be a way in which we bring the Lord into our daily lives, and prayer is complemented by action. Once we have sought and found the Lord's will, we must actually do it!

C.S. Lewis states that work and prayer are both important, “What we do when we weed a field is not quite different from what we do when we pray for a good harvest” (Lewis, 106). We cannot merely stand and wait, hoping for the Lord to intervene in our lives. We must invite Him into our lives, as if of self, so that He can influence the work that we are already doing. The Word stresses the importance of living according to the Lord's commandments in order to make prayer meaningful. “If [people] are insincere and unjust in respect to moral and civil life, their holy worship, adorations, and prayers have within them what repels heaven from them, instead of opening heaven to them as they believe; for their holy worship is like a vessel containing things putrid and filthy... But wholly different are holy worship, adorations, and prayers with those who are in the knowledges of truth and good and in a life according to them; with such these acts are pleasing to the Lord, for they are the effects wrought by

their spirit in the body, or the effects of their faith and love, thus they are not merely natural gestures, but spiritual acts” (*Apocalypse Explained* 126).

Ultimately, of course, as Dutch theologian Desiderius Erasmus wrote, “Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit.” Bidden or unbidden, God is present. God is always present, conjoining Himself to us, but we must freely reciprocate this conjunction to receive heaven. “For the Lord acts, and from Him man receives action, and operates as if of himself, even by the Lord from Himself. This operation of man from the Lord is imputed to him as his own, because he is held constantly by the Lord in freedom of choice. The freedom of choice resulting from this is the ability to will and to think from the Lord, that is, from the Word, and also the ability to will and to think from the devil, that is, contrary to the Lord and the Word. This freedom the Lord gives to man to enable him to conjoin himself reciprocally with the Lord, and by conjunction be gifted with eternal life and blessedness, since this, without reciprocal conjunction, would not be possible” (*True Christian Religion* 371:6). Reciprocal conjunction is effected by talking to the Lord in prayer and inviting Him into our every action.

God, and the associate spirits He sends to guide our spiritual footsteps toward heaven, are as close as they can be, but it takes prayer to conjoin us to God and heaven, which will change our spheres such that we can feel their influence. We need to be reminded not *to* pray, but that we are *already* praying. Our lives are our prayers, and we must continually strive to use our lives to forge an ongoing connection with heaven.

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