

An Introduction To The Subject Of Prayer

Indisputably important as it is and always will be, and spoken of in the Bible from the beginning, I am turning this evening to the subject of Prayer. When we consider that whole books are devoted to the subject, little can be said in a single talk about it. But even if that little does no more than stimulate your thinking, the talk will have accomplished its purpose.

Prayer is spoken of in the Bible from the beginning. You may be interested to know that from Genesis onwards and in at least 117 places throughout the Old Testament alone, the word "prayer" or the fact that someone prays, is mentioned. Abraham, Moses, Hannah, David, Solomon, Elisha, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Jonah, amongst others, all prayed; and often the actual content of their prayers is recorded. And then there are the Psalms, so many of which are prayers. And amongst those which are prayers, supplication, intercession, confession and thanksgiving, all play a part.

However, it is when we come to the NEW TESTAMENT that prayer emerges as something that has not been previously, or at best only inadequately, understood. The disciples urged Jesus to "Teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). And there are simple and direct instructions as to how to go about effective prayer. "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what your need before you ask him."(Matthew 6: 6-8).

There are, in the New Testament and in other places there, glimpses of the Lord's own moments of prayer. He prayed for the disciples and in turn told them to pray for them who would despise and misuse them. And we are all to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation (Matthew 26:41), "Ask, and it shall be given to you, seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened." (Matthew 7: 7, 8).

Even so, and for many of us, difficulties remain and our questions are many. Does in fact the Lord hear every prayer? Are there only certain things we should ask for? How does He answer? In fact what is the function, prayer is meant to serve?

At this stage I would like to turn to the teaching given through Emanuel Swedenborg which, considered together with the Biblical statements and teachings on the subject, holds within it the answers we are looking for.

In the book whose title is loosely translated into English "*Heavenly Secrets*", Swedenborg wrote of prayer as "nothing but communication" (*Arcana Caelestia* 3825).

"Prayer" he said, "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 the man's interiors towards God; but this with a difference according to the man's state, and according to the essence which is the subject of the Prayer." (*Arcana Caelestia* 2535).

Two things you will have noticed are mentioned as determining the value and usefulness of the Prayer, the state the person is in when he or she is praying, and what it is that is actually prayed for. And I think it would be helpful if we looked at each of these singly and on their own.

On the question of the state a person is in when they are praying it has to be said of all worship (and prayer is an act of worship), that the outward act separated from, and in the absence of real feeling and sincerity within, is not only useless but can even be harmful. "The Lord", we read, "looks to nothing else in the man who is at worship or who is praying than his heart, that is, his life as to love and faith; and if these things are not present within the worship and prayers, there is and can be no life and soul in them". (*Arcana Caelestia* 10143) And as is rightly asked, "What is, or can be, the prayer of the mouth but babbling, if the mind is not in it?" (ibid. 1094), What after all is a prayer for forgiveness, when there is no serious endeavour made to resist the evil being prayed about? Also of what use can a prayer for guidance be if we have no intention, no real intention, of seeking that guidance? Why pray for the Lord's kingdom to come if we ourselves are in our lives unprepared to do anything to hasten its coming?

The point is that genuine and effective prayer is that which proceeds from the heart of a person. It is one's life and one's feelings, not one's words, which opens the mind so that it can be receptive of influx from the Lord. Prayer is, above everything else, a channel by means of which influences from the Lord and from the heavens are able to reach us, softening, modifying and enriching our lives. And that channel, it must be emphasised, is opened not by words, not by our lips, but by our hearts.

Important then that the state a person is in when they are praying, so too is the subject of the prayer important; what is being prayed about. And in this regard this needs to be said at the outset, that the things sought and prayed about will differ according to the stage of spiritual progress and development a person has reached. As a person develops spiritually, so the nature and content of his prayers will change and develop accordingly.

Swedenborg wrote in one place, "He who is in faith from the Lord asks for nothing but what contributes to the Lord's Kingdom and to himself for salvation." (*Apocalypse Explained* 815). Nothing. Nothing else. But it is the advanced person, the person who has advanced spiritually, to whom these words apply. For a child or a young person, a prayer formulated strictly within the limits of that statement would be something of an abstraction. That's not what they are mainly thinking about. It is not where their concerns and anxieties and hopes and feelings about life lie. Therefore their prayers, and rightly so, will be in terms of those everyday things which are uppermost in their minds.

It is the same with us all when external states are upon us or when we are preoccupied with the more mundane affairs of life. Problems, heartaches, joys and sorrows, are all usefully prayed about. Our relationship with the Lord should be such that we feel free to turn to Him without awkwardness or embarrassment and open our hearts to Him. In doing so, and where a problem is concerned, we give Him the opportunity to influence our thinking about it; to remind us of other factors which we should be considering but up to this point have forgotten; to bring to our mind His teaching that we have temporarily forgotten.

Even so, prayer can have a more specialised function where our regeneration or spiritual rebirth is concerned. Talk about our hopes and ambitions, our plans for the future, our joy over some happening in our lives, a problem that has arisen, as we should feel free to do, yet the more important purpose that prayer serves is in terms of our spiritual growth and development. And as we get older and understand these things more clearly, this should come into focus with us more and more. And as it does our prayers will be more and more concerned with this vitally important aspect of things.

The Lord's supreme objective with every person is to work with them for the establishment of good and heavenly qualities in their lives so that after death they may take their place in heaven and be happy there. His overriding concern is with our eternal happiness and it is this He is looking to in all things. This is why He so often denies us what we ask for and think we should have, because it would not be in our eternal interests to have it, though we can't see it. In the long term it would do us harm and be a source of undoing in our lives.

Knowing then what the Lord's purpose with us is, our effort, our prayers, should more and more be towards cooperating with Him. Their content should increasingly be in terms of the things which need removing from our lives and in terms also of qualities which we hope can be established with us. In fact our aim should be when we pray, not to pray from ourselves, from what we want and think we should have, but from the Lord. Sounds strange to talk about praying from the Lord, but we can do it. We can pray from His purposes for us. We can pray from a knowledge and understanding of what He is striving to do for us. We can pray so that our prayer is an expression of our earnestness and willingness to cooperate with Him in this great work. We can and will pray for forgiveness, strength in temptation, guidance, understanding, patience, forbearance and tolerance. And the reassurance is given, "Whatever anyone asks from the Lord, and not from himself, he receives." (*Apocalypse Explained* 411). "If" as the Lord said, "you shall abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you."

If however, the Lord knows of those things we have need of before we ask, why ask? A seemingly logical question for which though there is an answer. The fact is that a need must be recognised before help can be given. That is so in everyday life and experience.

"He who believes in God" it is said, "says within himself, 'With God's help, I will overcome', and so he makes supplication, and gets help. This is not denied to anyone, but is given to him because the Lord from His divine love is in the continual endeavour to reform and regenerate man and so to purify him from evils. This constant endeavour of the Lord comes into effect when the man truly desires it and makes an effort for it" (*Charity* 203).