

PRAYER

An Adventure for the Will of God



Stephen Gunawan

PRAYER: A MISUNDERSTOOD ENDEAVOR

There are few Christians who would deny that the Christian life should be characterized by consistent prayer. However, honest Christians will, at one point or another in their life, have doubt on what the essence of prayer really is. The “what” of prayer seems to be defined easily enough – it is a time of communion and conversation with God, with our Maker. I don’t wish to mess with such simple yet powerful definition. But the “why” and the “how” are the more difficult to answer. And these are not silly questions, for the Disciples asked of the Lord the same exact thing. “Lord, teach us to pray” they asked Jesus (**Luke 11:1**). This is a question of “how,” and also a question of “why.”

Why do we pray? Many (if not most) religious people pray for two common reasons (1) as a disciplined activity meant to appease the wrath of God which they fear would otherwise come unless they offer some sort of prayer or sacrifice, (2) when they have petitions they need to present before God; requests of some sort that satisfies the need in their lives. I have found these to be common factors of prayer; whether Pagan or Christian.

We pray before each meal and before we go to bed in the dutiful manner that we feel is expected of us as religious people. We pray (or even conduct ritualistic services) before opening new businesses, when we move into new homes, when we enter into new relationships as a mark of dedication so that God will bless the new venture. We pray when we get into trouble; lamenting our fate as we do so and wondering why the good God would allow such bad things to happen to us; religious though we are.

But if that’s all there is to the Christian prayer, what does it reveal to us about our inward motivation? Doesn’t this mean that we are no different from any Pagan religion, or even ancient myths that pray only to appease wrath, or when we need certain benefits to be granted us?

Why do we pray? Some nobler Christians pray intercessory prayers; presenting petitions to God for the sake of others. They ask not for themselves; and they pray in confidence that God will grant them what they ask for. To them, this is the very definition of faith. Faith moves mountains. Faith causes God to stretch His hands to heal and to save. Faith believes that God is faithful to His word. And when He said that He grants claims that are done in Christ’s name, they hold on to this in full confidence. And they pray because they had faith that the prayers of a righteous man, as the Bible say, is powerful and effective. Prayer changes things; it moves God to act in ways He otherwise would not. Prayer touches even God, and causes Him to relent from sending calamities or judgment. It heals, restores, releases forgiveness.

But what of wisdom? And what of sovereignty? If God grants each and every one of our prayer, does that not presuppose that we are as wise as God; or that what we desire must be in accord to God’s own sovereign will? What if the two clashes? What if our desire matches not the will of God? What if our opinion of what is good, perfect and wise is contrary to His wisdom? Are not the thoughts of God infinitely higher than ours? Is it not true that the difference between His ways and our ways would be as far as the heavens are above the earth (**Isa 55:9**)? And if our opinion clashes with God’s, whose will prevail? If we say “ours,” are we not blatantly making God to become the servant to our will? But this would be heresy! If we say “God’s,” then what is the use of praying at all? Since God knows best, then whether or not we pray, the outcome changes not. It is like Abraham’s wager with God all over again. God knew exactly how many

righteous people there were in Sodom; Abraham was clueless. He interceded for Sodom to what he thought was a safe number, but changed nothing. Also, did Christ Himself not exemplify perfect submission when He said “not My will but Thine be done”?

Our thoughts linger on the promise that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (**James 5:16**) and we hope this could be us. We desperately hope that we do not pray in vain. Perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. Was the problem in the methodology? Is there a certain correct way to pray? Some people postulate that behind every prayer there is an invisible spiritual warfare being waged. And we need to fight that warfare and be victorious in it before our prayer can be effectual at all. And this might be why Jesus taught that some prayers need to be accompanied with fasting as well (**Mat 17:21**). So we lock ourselves in a room and pray for hours and hours whilst depriving our body of food and we think this is the more effective way to pray. Also, when the Disciples asked Jesus “how to pray?” He taught them the Lord’s Prayer. So some people think that this is indeed an absolute methodology of composed prayer taught by the Lord Himself, and they go in rampage repetitions of the Lord’s prayer; chanting it like some sort of mantra; thinking that by the persistence of it they are accomplishing some sort of victory in the invisible realm.

But when James talked about the prayer of a righteous man being powerful and effective, that was hardly the intention (in fact, quite the opposite!). He made reference to the battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (so there was spiritual battle indeed). But something is amiss! It was Baal’s prophets that were doing the lengthy prayers, not Elijah! It was Baal’s prophets who were performing all kinds of rituals and injuring their own bodies to make their prayers heard. All Elijah did was to utter but one sentence, and God answered him in an instant! Jesus Himself also warned that prayers are not heard for the many words (**Mat 6:7**). And as Christians, we do not believe that Satan has such obstructive powers over God’s will that we need to help God wage some sort of war. No! Even Satan’s power is within the sovereignty of God, and he does nothing without God’s permission (note that even when Satan wanted to torment Job, he had to ask for God’s permission).

Well, these thoughts are the struggles many of us face, or will face, if we are truly honest about it. And so this article is written to face these head-on; with all honesty and sincerity. I believe that God gives us an allowance to come to Him with our questions, when our doubts are there because we sincerely want to believe. When we do this, we are not questioning His authority but rather seeking for His will. This is why the title of the article is about adventure; because prayer is an adventure.

Lord, I pray that as we seek to understand prayer, we will embark on an adventure to understand You. In Christ’s Name we pray. Amen.

SIN AND THE FALLEN WILL

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has this to say about the ultimate purpose of man: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Proverbs are always so intriguing, because they are able to summarize the deep struggles and complexities of life into short sentences that everyone can empathize with. Well, I always like to classify the above sentence as a theological proverb, because it is able to summarize in such a succinct form such timeless truth that can be discussed in great length over, and over, and over again. And this proverb resonates with the

Lord's Prayer when it says, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name. Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Man is created after God's own image and likeness to give glory to God (**Isa 43:7**). But God was not going to achieve this by creating mindless dolls that bow at His very sight: He gave us this faculty called *freedom*. In and with this freedom, Adam was given the ability to chose to obey, but also to choose not to obey. When Adam sinned, he misused this freedom and trust that God had granted him. And because of this sin, we become separated from the Source of Way, Truth and Life.

What, then, is the result of this separation?

A diversion of will and desire; that's what. How many of us can honestly say that our prayer seeks for God's will, God's Kingdom to be accomplished on earth and in our hearts, and that we seek this above and beyond our own glory and our own will to be accomplished? How often would our prayer qualify such selfless criteria?

No, I think if we are honest enough, we will immediately admit that our prayers are more about us than it is about loving God and others. My happiness, my career, my family, my relationship, my health, my comfort, my future. Some of us could care less for God's glory, just for our stomachs to be filled and our needs fulfilled.

So, sin diverts our will and our desire. Instead of wanting to please God, we now want to please ourselves. Instead of striving to think God's thoughts after Him, we now suppress His truth with various justifications for our wickedness.

The fallen will changes our purpose of life. Instead of "glorifying God and enjoying Him forever," our lives now become centered on self-actualization and hedonistic desires. In other words, instead of glorifying God and enjoying Him, we seek "self-glory and the pleasure of life." And this changes our prayers; drastically.

Instead of praying for God's Kingdom to come, we pray that our own kingdom be established, and our will be done; in heaven as on earth. The harsh truth is, we now want to become king, and we wish that God will become our servant! Now, this is a terrible horrible accusation; except if it is true!

If God is not King over our lives; we are in fact usurping this throne. And to find out if this is so, the test is easy: Whose will do we pray for? If we cannot find joy in praying for God's will; if we cannot find excitement in seeing His will be accomplished on this earth (sometimes at the ultimate cost to ourselves), this means that sin is working within us to overtake this will. If we continually find ourselves on our knees and in tears begging for our own purposes and comfort, we serve our own will, not His. If we find that this is the only way we pray, then the bad news is this: The more we pray, the more we show ourselves as a self-centered; selfish human beings who only seek to utilize religion to attain our own evil desires. In short, the more we pray, the more we sin!

No wonder the Bible says that there is no one, and absolutely no one who seeks God; and no one who does good (**Rom 3:10-18**). No wonder also the Bible says that our most righteous acts, even those masked in the name of religion; are but filthy rags (**Ps 14:1-3**).

THE REDEMPTION OF PRAYER

If you find the previous chapter to be demotivating to your prayer life, you are not alone. But, it also exposes us for who we truly are. A lot of people find themselves demotivated when they are told not to pray for their own desires. We pray for something we want, pure and simple. And we are not trained to think otherwise.

But the Bible also says other weird, and seemingly conflicting things. Jesus Himself did say that He would grant us anything that we ask in His name, did He not (**John 14:13-14; John 16:23-24**)? And is it not true as well that there are various instances during which God is said to have changed His mind due to the repentant prayers of His people (see for example **2 Chr 7:14**)? And one of the main verses is central to in this article is this: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (**Ps 37:4**).

And I am not kidding. Despite all the necessary merry-go-round that I am bringing you in, I will (at the end of the article) conclude with this fact; that when we truly understand prayer as it is meant to be, God will indeed grant us every desires of our hearts! Or, when God has redeemed your prayer life, He will make it the powerful and effective prayer He meant for it to be (**James 5:16**). Oh, and you will ultimately also discover that prayer, far from being boring, is actually an exciting, purposeful and joyous adventure for God’s good, pleasing and perfect will.

Alright. I confess that I purposely tried to confuse you earlier. But believe me, it is absolutely necessary! If you do not understand the struggles depicted above, you will never appreciate the answer when it is given to you. But the time has come to give the answer, and I hope you will carefully read on.

The Redemption of Prayer = the Redemption of Will

Having explained sin as the falling away of our will and desires, the redemption of prayer must mean the redemption of this very will. Our sinful will need to be brought under the authority of God’s sovereign will. There needs to be a synchronization of will – our will under God’s. And this happens through prayer.

God never wills for us to come to Him in an enforced manner. He wants us to come consciously and willingly. This is why He allows us to come despite of our imperfect will and desire. We come to Him just as we are, but we also must come before Him ready to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (**Rom 12:1-2**). And to do this, we must come under the blood of the Lamb; lest His wrath consumes us because of our selfishness. This is what Paul explained when he said that the Spirit helps us to pray in our weaknesses (**Rom 8:26-27**). When we approach God with the wrong prayers, with the sinful prayers, the Spirit intercedes for us and perfects our prayers so that we are not consumed. And the Spirit does this while he waits for our transformation to become like the very Son of God. Look at the following verses (**Rom 8:28-30**). The very fact that the Spirit perfects our prayers is due to the fact that we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. God does not compromise on His demand for perfection: He just shows His patience and longsuffering by receiving us in His presence whilst working this sanctification in us according to his good purpose. And God does not fail! For those He predestined, he also called; those He called, he also justified; and those He justified; He also glorified (**v. 30**). We who are the elect will surely be glorified! We will be presented to Christ as the perfect bride, free of blemish and completely conformed to His image! And it is this image of Christ that He sees in us, which is the only thing that can make us acceptable to Him.

Sanctifying of the Will = Requirement to Deny Oneself

Our will is being redeemed; it is being synchronized from grace to grace to be conformed to the will of Christ. By saying it is “being synchronized, being changed, being renewed,” it means that it is not yet synchronized, not yet perfect.

When we receive Christ as Savior and Lord, our heart is set on the right direction. We who in the past have no reason to live for anyone else but for ourselves are now moved and compelled to live for the Lord who sacrificed Himself, died and rose for us (**2 Cor 5:14-15**). Because of this, our DIRECTION is already fixed on Christ, and as such our DIRECTION is already perfect. But that does not mean that we will not sway to the left or to the right on our journey to glorification. If you ever hear someone say in theological terms “already but not yet,” this is what it meant. We still make mistakes here and there, but when we are saved, God’s Spirit in our hearts compels us to return to our Lord and continue on the journey. We err but for a moment, only to be reminded to head on in our path. We can no longer live and linger in sin (**1 John 3:9**).

The true mark of a Christian is this will and commitment to live for God and not for ourselves. And when we make this very commitment, we are given the only possible means of true morality and righteousness; for our good deeds are no longer self-centered but rather God-centered.

Our weaknesses will keep on pestering us to return to our old ways, but ultimately our desires are already set on living for our God. I thank God that the writers of the Bible are truly God-inspired. They do not cover their own weaknesses, but rather expose it so we too may learn. Even the great apostle Paul mentioned of this battle of will happening within him, for he did not what he wanted to do, but what he did not want to do he kept on doing (**Rom 7:14-25**). Paul’s direction and desire was already set: he wanted to live to glorify Christ. But this desire is sometimes not translated into action. Paul failed sometimes; as do we. But this very failure caused him to be even more aware of the patience of God; of the grace upon grace that was bestowed upon him. That was why he did not end in despair but rather in a complete surrender: “*Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (**vv. 24-25**).

Wrestling with God

We see in Paul’s words this tension of the redeemed life vs the fallen will. Because of this tension, we struggle before God. Because of this tension, we wrestle *with* God, as Jacob once did.

This term in itself raises a curiosity of some sort. How do we wrestle with God? And most importantly, why would God entertain us on that level? Why would he allow us to writhe against Him, to resist Him, to wrestle against His sovereignty? Yet that is exactly what He does, time and again with His chosen people.

For a few examples, we come back to Abraham’s haggles. Why would God even bother? Surely He knew how many righteous people there were in Sodom. And then there is Jacob and his infamous struggle with God. Why would God even bring Himself down to Jacob’s level; and even pretended to lose? What about Elijah and his weird temper asking God to just kill him? And, perhaps the weirdest of all, why would God even bother with Jonah who was clearly an unwilling tool? Was God not able to use anyone else? If God was indeed able to use Balaam’s donkey, and if God can make good His threat of using stones to worship Him if the Israelites wouldn’t, why did God not simply strike Jonah dead for his utter disrespect? I’m sure using the

fish instead of Jonah to evangelize to Niniveh would be even more effective! Why allow the struggle, the wrestle, the tussle?

I think it is crucial for us to tune our minds this way so we'd come to appreciate what was going on. We need to get rid of the utopian thinking that the Christian faith causes us to enter into some kind of paradise free of struggle, of suffering; where our belief in God causes us to never question Him in the slightest manner; where our faith always leads us to live in an ecstatic emotions, ever pleased with God's will and God's way. A brief look at the heroes of faith tells us this is never the case. Jesus indicated to Peter that he will be led into an unwanted place to die a miserable death (**John 21:18-19**). Peter's renewed trust and strong commitment to obedience did not mean that he would not struggle to accept this fate that was dawned upon him. It would mean tearful struggles and hours of wrestling with God to ask for strength to carry it through. It would not be easy, but God would be with him, each step of the way.

So, I want to invite us to look at the above questions from another angle. God knew exactly how many righteous people there were in Sodom; but he wanted Abraham to learn intercession before he could truly live up to his name as the "father of many nations." Note that just before this event God changed Abram's name to Abraham (Abram means exalted father whilst Abraham means father of multitudes). God bequeathed Abraham's status before he showed any sign of worthiness. And after that, He taught Abraham to intercede for the nations. And so Abraham learned, and he was transformed through this event. I will not go into great length to explaining this, lest we get sidetracked from our main topic. (See my articles on Abraham for the detailed exposition).

Next in our example is Jacob's wrestling with God. Instead of asking why God even bothered to wrestle with mere man, we see here the willingness of God to entertain man at his level. It had been 20 years since Jacob ran from his brother Esau for cheating him of his birthright. His brother was so angered, he vowed to kill Jacob. Now, all of a sudden, God instructed Jacob to return to his hometown; promising to be with him (**Gen 31:3**). Of course Jacob was terribly concerned. On his way back, Jacob was informed by his men that Esau was coming to meet him, bringing along four hundred men! Upon hearing this, Jacob pleaded with God to make good His promise of accompaniment. And then, he instructed his men to send gifts to appease Esau. Now, it is right after this story that the event of Jacob wrestling with God, who appeared as a man, happened. We are not told how that even started, just that it did. Jacob knew that the man was extraordinary and insisted on a blessing from him. And Jacob's later confession indicate that the "Man" might very well be the pre-incarnate Christ, as he said, "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (**Gen 32:30**). Straight after this event, Jacob met with Esau. Now, I don't know about you, but this story seems to be a bit odd, coming out of nowhere between Jacob's struggle and his meeting with Esau. But there is a significance. Jacob was struggling in his inward soul, insisting God's blessing on him so he'd be safe. So, God brought that struggle outwardly to illustrate a truth that will strengthen Jacob. The truth is this: God may use ordinary occurrences, and He may use circumstances that seem weak, not divine. But that does not mean that His divine prowess is not at work. This "Man" might look human, might even pretend to lose to an ordinary human, but a mere touch from this ordinary Man crippled Jacob for life (**31:25**)! So God need not repeat His promise of being with Jacob; He illustrated it. And this may not be what Jacob asked for, but it was definitely what he needed.

Next we hear about Elijah. This man of great faith had just dramatically humiliated Ahab and his idol Baal, along with 450 prophets of Baal. Now, Jezebel, Ahab's wife made a threat, and Elijah was somehow deeply mortified! I'll spare the drama of what must have happened, because again this is not the time nor place for

that. Elijah was given faith to challenge Baal, but he knew his triumph was not because he was a great warrior, but because his God was. Now that Jezebel made a threat against him (and not his God), Elijah wasn't sure if God would protect him. And to his surprise, God was terrifyingly silent! It was no secret that here were mass killing of Yahweh's prophets, and Elijah suspected the same fate would befall him. And so he cried, *"take my life; I am no better than my ancestors"* (**1 Kings 19:4**). And what God did was weirder still. He did not reassure Elijah, nor did he rebuke him for not believing, He merely gave Elijah something to eat that would strengthen him in such a way, he continued walking for forty days and forty nights! Now, this would mean that for forty days and forty nights Elijah was wrestling with the silence of his God. Make a brief study of the Bible's numerology. 40 is the number God uses to let His people meditate on something. God did not speak up one bit, and Elijah was continuously haunted with the fact that he was abandoned for dead. And after this long, deadening silence, God told Elijah what was wrong. God then gave three powerful experiences to Elijah: great wind, earthquake and fire. But God was in none of those. Then, came a gentle whisper; and Elijah knew it was God. And, Elijah found the answer he was looking for. Elijah, like many of us would, was looking in all the wrong places. In fear for his life, Elijah was looking for great signs or loud proclamation that God would protect him. He wasn't doubting his God, just looking to get a word of promise. But God wanted Elijah to learn to seek His will in the subtle signs, in His quiet leading. God's silence must not be mistaken for His abandonment, for God never forsakes His people.

As a last example of this chapter, I want us to take a look at Jonah. I put this last because this has been the weirdest of all! Now, with Jonah God does something that I would never expect of Him. The God that I know doesn't live in temples built by human hands, and He is not served by humans as if He needed anything, for He alone creates all existence by His word of power (see **Acts 17:24-28**). The God I know used Balaam's donkey, and could have used stones to worship Him if the Israelites were unwilling. The God I know would not tolerate disobedience and such utter unwillingness. But what about Jonah? This puzzled me for a long, long time. Again, to cut the story short, the story of Jonah proved to me of God's patience in disciplining His elect. Niniveh of the Old Testament was a terrible enemy of the Israelites, and they were repeatedly rampaged by the Ninivetes. I can relate somehow to Jonah. In Indonesia, in 1998, a great riot broke out, and the Chinese were victimized. They were robbed, raped, murdered, and many were forced into exile. Now, if I was one of those who were victimized by the riot; if I had lost anything more than material goods. If I had lost a loved one, for example. I would surely entertain a bitter hatred toward the people. And if, after all that, God were to ask me to serve these people, I might have acted the way Jonah did. So, the story of Jonah has always been to me a story of God's 'biblical counseling' for Jonah's bitterness. God forced Jonah to serve Niniveh, and was seemingly persistent at doing so, not because He needed Jonah and had no one else. It was because Jonah needed it. And we see how God was especially patient with Jonah, even using the tree and the worm to illustrate His will to Jonah. On a sidenote, we are given a contrast here to Christ, for He also performed a sign of Jonah to us when He died and rose again (see **Mat 12:38-29**). Jonah was the unwilling servant, Jesus was the willing Servant. But they both had a similar ministry: to be God's tool for salvation to His enemy. We, sinners, are the enemies of God (and thus, of Christ). And God was not filled with pleasant, romantic thoughts about us. Yet, love surpasses mere feeling, and He decided to save us despite of what we have become. Contrary to popular messages, sinners are not lovable people. Sinners are disgusting, corrupt, sad and hopeless. We need to understand this if we are to deeply appreciate what God had done for us.

Let's see what have been brought to the table. This is more like the reality of our everyday life: God's apparent silence and indifference over what we prayed for. Eventless prayer life – no miracle, no signs or wonders. God's enforced will over us to do what we dread. To those who have experienced this kind of prayer life, they have known what it means to wrestle with God.

But look at the other side of the coin. That God would wrestle with us is in itself a great wonder. As we have learned in the biblical examples above, each of those silence not only represented God's sovereignty over us. They also represented His love, His concern, His wisdom. It is His wisdom to will and to act according to His good purpose (**Phil 2:13**), to work all things for good (**Rom 8:28**).

Wrestling with God's Attributes

Allow me to dive deeper into what it means to wrestle with God, so that this article can become an even more useful reflection for our everyday lives.

Consider this following: God permits His people to come to him with their questions and struggles; and He allows them to come in such honest, blatant and uncensored way that some of the cases may sound like borderline disrespect. Job acknowledged God's sovereignty, but questioned His justice. Jonah acknowledged God's love and mercy but questioned His judgment. Habakkuk acknowledged God's holiness and His right to punish His people, but he questioned God's methodology. Asaph through his Psalm (Ps 73) acknowledged God's goodness but questioned how it works out. Each of these people have questioned God in ways that would seem disrespectful, and I will illustrate just how.

But before we look into each of these cases, I want to throw yet another reflection to meditate upon. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, and they grumbled and complained against Him, God immediately punished them. What, then, is the difference between the grumbling of the Israelites, and the complaint of the prophets?

Now, Job acknowledged God's sovereignty in such a faithful manner, that he made the decision upfront to trust Him even if God slayed Job (**Job 13:15**). He acknowledged that God had the supreme right to grant him blessings, as well as calamities. And despite his friends' misplaced advices, Job retained his trust in God. All Job's friends gave him were advices that echoed all the cliché sayings of Christianity; that only added to Job's frustration, such that he called them miserable comforters (**Job 16:2**). Yet in all honesty, Job struggled to understand God, to understand how and why a just God would allow overwhelming suffering on a man who maintained a life of faith and virtue before God. Job's suffering was such that he cursed the day of his birth and repeatedly wished to die. He so longed to get but a word from God, to explain what was being done to him. He said, "if only I knew where to find Him; if only I could go to His dwelling! I would state my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what He would answer me, and consider what He would say to me" (**Job 23:2-5**). In such sincere struggle Job reached appoint of despair wherein he made multiple complaints like this one: "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made my life bitter" (**Job 27:2**). Yet even in such moments Job retained his commitment for virtuous life! At moments, like that of Job 19, Job switches from complaints to praise, from bitter complaints about the bitterness of life to the eternal hope of salvation. Yet, observe the end result of this severe trial for Job. When God finally gave His reply in **Job 39-41**, Job understood God, and he rejoiced for it. He attained a deeper and more personal knowledge of God, as he exclaimed, "My ears have heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (**Job 42:5-6**).

Next let us look at Habakkuk. In contrast to Job, Habakkuk received a very quick reply to his complaint. He was seeking justice for the cruelty of the Chaldeans that was unleashed upon the Israelites; and charged God with injustice and toleration of evil (**Hab 1:3**). But God's immediate reply to him was far from what he could understand. God said that it was in fact He who sent the ruthless Chaldeans to rampage Israel. Habakkuk was far from satisfied with God's answer. It was understandable that God should punish the Israelites for the

stiff-necked disobedience; but he was disturbed with the fact that such punishment came from a nation who were even worse off than Israel (see **Hab 1:13**). Convinced of his own logical reasoning, Habakkuk stood almost confidently and said this, “I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what He will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint” (**Hab 2:1**). But once again, this two-way conversation between Habakkuk and God ended with Habakkuk conceding God’s wisdom, as he offered a prayerful song, “I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (**Hab 3:16-18**).

Such examples abound in the Bible, and I could go on and on with more examples. But the point I am trying to make is this: Prayer is an opportunity for us to come before God in all honesty to find the answer to all our struggles. You see, God’s attributes are so unfathomable, so incomprehensible, and so apparently paradoxical that we cannot comprehend Him fully. Yet, in His grace and mercy; and His desire to commune with us, God wills to reveal His will to us. Through the Scriptures He reveals His story, brought to us through the experiences of men and women of faith who had gone ahead. They are our cloud of witnesses (**Heb 12:1**) who through their lives written in the Bible told us the story of the Redeemer God who reaches out to His elect to live a life of communion with Him.

But it is not enough that they experience God; we need to personally know Him as well. To be able to comprehend how His justice works together with His mercy; and how His love works together with His holy wrath; and how His sovereign will gives us true freedom. All these otherwise paradoxical attributes of God are put on display in the struggle of our daily lives. In such circumstances, the saints have taught us how we are to come before God. We are to come not only in orthodox credal confessions that say all the right things; but are dishonest about our internal confusions. To help us solve these inherent, impossible disputes, God permits us to come to Him and to “charge” Him with His own attributes. When life’s turmoil caused us to question His goodness, instead of merely confessing His sovereignty but inherently confused about His goodness and grace; come to Him and be blatantly honest. Pour out your hearts to Him! For He accepts these honest rebuttal, and appreciates it more than the pretension of submission; a confessed obedience that does not come from a willing heart. Who knows, He might relent on certain calamities when we do pray to Him. For when we ask of God, He will indeed answer us. Only trust not only His omnipotence, His ability and willingness to answer; but also His sovereignty and infinite wisdom – in fact all of His divine attributes!

Let me end this part with a few quotes from “*A Grief Observed*” by CS Lewis. The book compiles Lewis’ reflections on the death of his wife. It contained his honest struggle with God. And the words were not pretty:

“When you are happy, so happy you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be — or so it feels— welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.”¹

Yet, in such struggle, Lewis began finding God in the gentlest whisper. Through his violent struggles he was finding God helping him cope with his extreme grief.

“I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.”ⁱⁱ

Lewis echoed Elijah when he said that his frantic cries deafened him to the still small voice that he desperately hoped to hear. Yet, this is so often the very adventure prayer life takes us into. It triggers a lifelong quest to seek God, to seek His will over our lives. Yet, if we are to reinstate our commitment of following Christ and becoming His disciples, this will be the very quest He takes us in. And thus, we are called to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Him (**Mat 16:24**). This wrestle with God is what the cross represents. It is agonizing, horrifying, and in no way desirable. It is, however, a time God provides to do a deep soul-searching where He also performs His sanctification work in us. It is the process whereby God renews us to become like Christ.

PERFECT SUBMISSION, PERFECT DELIGHT

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4).

I have told you that I will conclude with **Ps 37:4**. So this is also nearing the end of the article. The climax of examples has and must come to Christ Himself, as One exemplifying perfect submission.

The story brings us to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus faces God the Father in prayer one last time before He is given over to be crucified. In it, we are told that Jesus sweat drops of blood. In this modern age, we are given a medical definition for this: *Hematidrosis*. It is a very rare condition which may occur when a person is suffering extreme levels of stress, for example, facing his or her own deathⁱⁱⁱ. Jesus Himself struggled with God and pleaded three times with these words *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”* (**Mat 26:36-44**).

When I first read this, I was bewildered at one thing: Was Jesus' will at this point different from the Father's? Was it the case that Christ wanted the Father to spare His life, and yet the Father had another will?

We are walking on risky ground. For I do not want to presume that we can know in full what truly happened in the garden of Gethsemane. And I believe that this event will remain, in large, a mystery. But I firmly believe, even at this very point, Christ and the Father had the same will. It was God's will for salvation. Yet, perhaps we need to understand God's will as having different dimensions as well. There is (1) His good, perfect will: His desire for what is perfect, but there is also (2) His permissive will: what He allows to happen that is anything less than perfect and holy^{iv}.

Further, I believe that the overwhelming sorrow that Christ experienced was not at the fear of torture or even death (horrifying though it really was!). I believe the “cup” that Christ was dreading was the separation between Him and the Triune Godhead. That for a brief moment in history; and for the only time in eternity (this is the mystery that we can never understand in this lifetime), the second person of the Godhead is separated! I believe this was the “cup” that Jesus talked about, because at the Cross, Jesus uttered no words of complaint, spare one: *“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”* For a brief moment therein, Jesus experienced the very punishment for sin: Separation from God! For *“God had made He who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”* (**2 Cor 5:21**). Pastor James Long said in one of his Sunday sermons that the God who retracted the blade from Abraham's hand; the God

who knew the pain within Abraham's heart over the experience of sacrificing his own son; this God did not retract the blade that befell His own Son. The 'blade' fell on Jesus.

So, within His desire, neither God the Father nor God the Son desired the separation. But in His permissive will, there is no other remedy for sin. Christ's death was the only remedy for sin, because *"the law requires the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22)*. Christ had to die because of God's love for mankind. This we often hear. But what we need to hear more, especially in this day and age of false positivity, is that Christ had to die because of God's holiness, because of God's righteousness. His holiness required that there be a punishment for sin; and that punishment is death. Therefore, an atonement is required for the appeasement of His wrath toward sin. On the Cross, Jesus experienced that wrath on our behalf, full force.

Because of His incarnation, the Son of God is able to empathize with our weaknesses (**Heb 4:15**). The writer of Hebrews gives this as the very reason that we can approach God's throne with confidence, so that we'd receive mercy and help in our times of need (**v16**). When we pray to God in our times of need, Christ hears; He understands. He had experienced pain, suffering, injustice far above anything we can ever think or imagine.

Our Response: Prayer as a Quest to Follow God's Will

We are almost at the end of the article. We must now face the questions we were exposed to at the beginning of the article, this time head-on. Why do we pray? And How?

The only way our prayer can be ever so slightly acceptable to God is when it is heard through Christ. And that is why we pray in Jesus' name. It was Christ who reconciled us to God so we'd no longer be an object of wrath. This act of propitiation that would bring glory costed Him humiliation. To give us eternal life, He died. To give us a life filled with the abundance of God's grace, He was emptied of glory. To strengthen us in our time of weakness, He was made weak. This was what made prayer possible, what made it acceptable. Jesus taught us to address God as "Our Father in heaven." But it was really His sacrifice that causes us to be adopted as sons (read **Heb 4:4-7**). The work of Christ was the foundation of the Lord's prayer.

And so, He teaches us to pray in a way that brings glory to God, that enforces His will in and over our lives. "Hallowed by Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." By it, we are to acknowledge that our lives - every year, day and second of it depends on His grace "give us today our daily bread." By it, we are given the power to forgive, because we have first been forgiven "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." By it we pray for His guidance as High Priest over our lives "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." And by it, we are able to make our lives a doxology to God "for Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory now and forever."

I'd end by giving an example of what a Christ-like prayer; that of Paul's. Paul comes strikingly to me as a person who dares say these words: *"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1)*. This is a bold statement, and for a moment I thought of it as resembling pride. But as I meditated it, it came to me as the most sacrificial statement ever said. By saying that, Paul is living a life of self-sacrifice; one he dedicated to imitate Christ and not to fulfill his own desires. After saying words like that, if he even lived for one second for his own stomach, he would ruin everything he worked for.

This Paul was given a thorn in his flesh to torment him. We are not told what this was, whether it was a physical ailment or more a spiritual one. But we know it was overwhelmingly agonizing. Paul wasn't a spoiled

brat who was unfamiliar with suffering. As if echoing His teacher in the garden of Gethsemane, Paul pleaded three times for it to be taken away from him. And we see in this example Paul's life of prayer as his adventure of knowing God's will:

1. **Paul's Desire.** Paul desired relief from that pain, as would we. There is nothing wrong with that.
2. **God's Answer.** And the answer came from God, and it was a clear NO!
3. **Paul's Response – A Shift in Will**

Paul's response is the most shocking of all. I would have expected him to be reluctant in receiving that answer. At the very least, he would not have been happy about it! Yet, Paul's answer exhibited a very extreme shift in his will. He said, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor 12:9-10). Not only did he not turn to complaints or grumbles, he was boasting, delighting, and being glad in it! We see here a man who had made himself ready to receive the will of God; a man who lived only for his will. So much so that, at a mere mention of His will, Paul shoved away his preference, pain and discomfort and embraced God's will with great joy! This was Paul's perfect submission, perfect delight.

Again, Paul was echoing His Teacher by doing this. We are told that, despite the event in Gethsemane, Jesus went to the Cross with *"a joy that is set before Him"* (Heb 12:2). In the perfect submission of Christ was His perfect delight. He saw that with it, He was redeeming a people for Himself; one that would be consecrated to Him, and one who will become like Him. How do we respond to our God who did this? No less than giving our lives as a living sacrifice! (Rom 12:1-2)

Christ's delight in seeing a consecrated Church. Paul's delight in experiencing God's power. All of these came at the cost of suffering. Yet they delighted in God's will. And through this delight their prayers had indeed been answered. So, *"delight in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart"* (Ps. 77:4). Definitely!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This is the joy of prayer: That with it, we are being taken into an adventure of knowing God. That with it, we are being transformed day by day to want what He wants, to enjoy the good and perfect things He has prepared for us.

And with that, this is the promise of prayer: That if we delight in Him; in every beautiful, perfect and righteous things that He will reveal to us; we will indeed receive whatever we ask for in prayer. When we have been brought into this place, we will truly know what it means that we are created *"To glorify God and enjoy Him forever."*

Finally, prayer joins us to the eternal eschatological hope we have found in Christ. God accepts our imperfect prayer life in sight of the perfection of Christ – to whose image we are being conformed into. Meanwhile, we are being sanctified through this life of prayer; as our prayers mold our wills and desires, to love that which is truly beautiful, righteous and perfect. It teaches us to enjoy that which is truly enjoyable; and to find everything about God to be beautiful, pleasing and perfect. Prayer, brothers and sisters, is an adventure. It is something God grants so that we can embark on this wonderful journey to know Him as we are known.

Soli Deo Gloria!

ⁱ Lewis, C.S. (1961) *A Grief Observed*. San Fransisco: Harper & Row, Chp 1

ⁱⁱ Lewis, C.S. (1961) *A Grief Observed*. San Fransisco: Harper & Row, Chp 3

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hematidrosis>

^{iv} Now, if we are talking in theological definitions, there needs to be a third dimension: God's "Given over" will. This is when God decides to remove mercy and pronounce judgment as a result of sin. But for the purposes of the article, we will just talk about the first two.