

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	81		Gary L.W. Johnson
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Intercessory Prayer

Lords Day 45

Question 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

Answer: Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us: (a) and also, because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of him, and are thankful for them. (b)

(a) Ps.50:14 Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: Ps.50:15 And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me. (b) Matt.7:7 Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: Matt.7:8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Luke 11:9 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Luke 11:10 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Luke 11:13 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? 1 Thess.5:17 Pray without ceasing.

Why do we pray? What happens when we pray? Many people have a decidedly mystical notion when it comes to prayer. They pray to bring about changes in themselves. Prayer here primarily is something that will transform the consciousness. It is a method of discipline, like meditation or chanting that enables a person to attain bliss or tranquility. This is *not* the Biblical understanding of prayer. Granted things do happen to us when we pray as the Bible instructs us. The Psalms are full of prayers that show us that prayer does relieve the troubled mind (Psalm 102). In the Scriptures, prayer is depicted as that which consists of personal communication and communion with the Living God. Prayer does bring about changes because God changes things in answer to prayer. Abraham Kuyper, that great Dutch theologian, put his finger on this aspect of prayer when he wrote, “Through foolish prayer we come to purified prayers. Through earthly prayer we come to those holier ones, which have been watered with dew from above and which radiated sunlight of a higher order. And such is the case with individual, particular prayers. These, too, are not at once purified and made perfect. These, too, go through a process in the soul. These, too, spring up from a root, and only by degrees develop themselves into prayer such as our Father who is in heaven expects of His child; prayer which is not merely a sound of the lips, but rise from the depths of the heart; prayer, in which one’s own sense and inclination agree; prayer in which not merely a spontaneous thought but our whole person expresses itself; prayer, in which in very truth the soul pours itself out before the Holy One.”¹ Prayer cannot be formalistic and mechanical if it is to truly conform to the Biblical pattern. In the episode recorded in our text Moses’ intercession for the nation of Israel captures the essence of this important aspect of Biblical prayer.

BACKGROUND TO THE TEXT

Moses had ascended Mt. Sinai where he received the Law, written by the finger of God, on two tablets of stone. Moses' descent from the mountain, however, was not triumphant. God told Moses to quickly return to the camp because the Israelites were already forsaking the covenant and debasing themselves in idolatry. God, in covenantal faithfulness, executed judgment (Exodus 32:19-35). Would the apostate nation be utterly destroyed? Moses ascends once more to the top of Mt. Sinai to intercede for the people.

I. WHAT MOSES PRAYS AGAINST

Moses' intercession is a noble example of selflessness in prayer. He seeks no glory for himself. In fact, he deliberately avoids seeking anything for himself.

A. His Own Honor: God's anger at the rebellious nation was such that He informs Moses that He would start all over and would make Moses the new founder of a nation. Moses would be the new Abraham (Exodus 32:9, 10). Edmund Clowney observes, "Don't pass quickly over what that offer could mean to Moses. Had not this idolatrous people renounced his leadership? Had they not grumbled, complained, even threatened to court martial and stone him for following God's directions? From the beginning, God had identified himself as the God of Abraham. Now he would be the God of Moses, and of the children of Moses."² Moses is emphatic in his rejection of this offer, and gives three reasons: (1). God's name and glory would suffer amongst the nations. (2). God's faithfulness to His promise is at stake. (3). Moses' life would be meaningless if Israel was destroyed.

B. God's Own Compromise: Not only did Moses pray against his own honor, he also prayed against God's proposed compromise. God declared that He would not destroy the nation, but he also declared that He would not go in the midst of Israel. Instead the angel of God's presence would be there instead (this particular angel is described in Exodus 23:20, 21). The difference was this: would God only go before them to lead them, or would He dwell amongst them? Moses passionately implores God to remember His covenant promise (Exodus 34:9).

II. WHAT MOSES PRAYS FOR

Moses does not offer excuses, or plead better performance in days ahead. He does not try to defend Israel's idolatry by putting the golden calf in a cultural context, or by repeating Aaron's lame defense. He does not plead what he has done for the Lord, but rather what the Lord has done for him: called him, known him by name, chosen him to lead the people (Exodus 33:12, 13).³

A. God in the Midst: What was it that distinguished Israel from all the other nations? It certainly was not anything in them. What made them different was their God who was present with them. Without God's presence, the Promised Land loses its meaning. Moses understood this all too clearly. Only God's presence can offer the *rest* that the land so richly symbolizes (Exodus 33:14, 15).

B. The Blessings of His Presence: We often hear people pray "and Lord just be with our brother Bob as he travels..." What are we praying for when we ask the Lord "to be with" someone? When Moses seeks to have the blessing of God's presence he immediately prays that he may *know* the Lord (Exodus 33:12, 13). Moses seeks more than the cloud of glory moving before the march. He would have personal knowledge of the Lord. He would know the Lord, because the Lord says that he knows him. Here is the tie that will bind the Lord to his people: the personal fellowship of the mediator with the Lord. Moses also prays that he may know the Lord's ways. He would have the Lord

reveal his purposes—a moving prayer that bears witness to Moses’ conviction that God’s purposes are at last gracious toward his people (Jeremiah 29:11). God’s ‘ways’ are revealed in his Name, the declaration of who he is for his people. Moses prays to the God of the burning bush to complete the revelation he then began. The knowledge of God which Moses requests refers to a personal or intimate knowledge that is rooted in God’s character. This in turn stems from the fact that Moses has found favor in the eyes of God (cf. Exodus 20:4-6; 3:21, and Genesis 6:8). The Hebrew word for *favor* “is derived from a verb that indicates the showing of unmerited kindness; the word thus indicates condescending, free, and gracious kindness, goodness not based on obligation.”⁴ Finally, note the connection with Moses’ desire to see the glory of God (Exodus 33:18) and this association with God’s presence.

III. HOW GOD ANSWERS

Moses’ prayer cannot be fully answered—he cannot see the face of God and live. What God does give Moses “is quite specifically *not* the *sight* of his beauty, his glory, his Presence—that, indeed, he pointedly denies. What he gives rather is a *description*, and at that, a description not of how he *looks* but of how he is.”⁵ What Moses desired in knowing God is granted in the display of God’s glory as manifested in His sovereign grace (Exodus 24:6, 7).

CONCLUSION: J.I. Packer, in his classic *Knowing God*, wrote, “...knowing God is a matter of *grace*. It is a relationship in which the initiative throughout is with God – as it must be, since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favour by our sins. *We* do not make friends with *God*; *God* makes friends with *us*, bringing us to know Him by making His love known to us. Paul expresses this thought of the priority of grace in our knowledge of God when he writes to the Galatians, ‘now that you have come to know God, *or rather to be known by God...*’ (Gal. 4:9). What comes to the surface in this qualifying clause is the apostle’s sense that grace came first, and remains fundamental, in his readers’ salvation. Their knowing God was the consequence of God’s taking knowledge of them. They know Him by faith because He first singled them out by grace.

“‘Know,’ when used of God in this way, is a sovereign-grace word, pointing to God’s initiative in loving, choosing, redeeming, calling, and preserving. That God is fully aware of us, ‘knowing us through and through’ as we say, is certainly part of what is meant, as appears from the contrast between our imperfect knowledge of God and His perfect knowledge of us in I Corinthians 13:12. But it is not the main meaning. The main meaning comes out in passages like the following,

“‘And the LORD said unto Moses... thou hast found grace in my sight, and *I know thee by name*’ (Exod. 33:17). ‘Before I formed thee (Jeremiah) in the belly *I knew thee*; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee’ (Jer. 1:5). ‘I am the good shepherd, *and know my sheep*, and am known of mine... and I lay down my life for the sheep... My sheep hear my voice, *and I know them...* and they shall never perish.’ (John 10:14f., 27f.). Here God’s knowledge of those who are His is associated with His whole purpose of saving mercy. It is a knowledge that implies personal affection, redeeming action, covenant faithfulness, and providential watchfulness, towards those whom God knows. It implies, in other words, salvation, now and for ever.”⁶

What Moses sought from God reaches its fulfillment in the person of Christ. The dwelling of God with man is in Christ’s incarnation. Here is where the glory of God is revealed. Moses’ face shone as he came down from the mountain. We reflect as in a mirror the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ (II Corinthians 3:18; 4:6).

¹ A. Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God* (rpt. P&R, 1979), p. 47.

² E. Clowney, *Leaders at Prayer: Messages by the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in California Given During the Fall of 1990 Week of Prayer* (WTS, 1990), p. 2. I am indebted to Dr. Clowney (who was one of my professors at Westminster) for the substance of this outline.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ W.H. Gispen, *Bible Student's Commentary: Exodus* (Zondervan, 1982), p. 307.

⁵ J. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Word, 1987), p. 452.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1973), p. 36.