

# Prayer and the Question of Intercession

by the Rev. Roy Franson

“O Lord my God...hear the supplication of Your servant.... Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive” (I Kings 8:30).

This is part of a long, beautiful prayer which King Solomon offered to the Lord on the day of the dedication of the temple he had built in Jerusalem. In this most remarkable prayer Solomon humbly acknowledges the greatness and trustworthiness of the one God of heaven and earth. Time and again he had experienced the perfect justice and ceaseless mercy of the Lord; yet, with his hands stretched toward heaven, he prays that the Lord might judge the people of Israel righteously—condemning the wicked and justifying the righteous. And—knowing that the people would often disobey the commandments and sin against the Lord, and on that account would suffer from famine and pestilence, or else be delivered into the hands of their enemies—he ardently prays that the Lord might forgive them, and “teach them the good way in which they should walk.”

We can clearly see in this prayer all the important elements of prayer. There is the acknowledgment of the one God of heaven and earth. “Lord God of Israel, there is no God in heaven above or on earth below like You...” He prays for the Lord’s presence, forgiveness and mercy, although he knows in his heart that the Lord is forever present, forgiving and merciful. Thus the *need* for prayer is strongly implied. There is the element of self-acknowledgment and self-dedication, pointing to the importance of people applying themselves according to their best understanding of the commandments, which involves study, meditation and self-discipline. Also contained in it are prayers for Divine blessings, as well as prayers for those who err, or sin, or suffer, teaching us that the Lord can bestow His blessings upon us only to the extent that we ask, and that the life of charity and use cannot be a reality on earth unless the spirit of concern, tolerance and forgiveness prevails. “Then hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive.”

## History of Prayer

Prayer is as old as humankind, as universal as religion, and as instinctive as breathing. Prayers have been, are, and ever will be, a most important form of worship, or practice of devotion, in all religions.

Among the people of the Most Ancient Church, prayers were far more orderly and perfect than the prayers of succeeding generations. For the worship of the Lord with the most ancient people was a worship of life, which is the true and genuine form of worship signified by prayer. It is therefore revealed that “prayers, in the internal sense, mean all things of worship” (*Apocalypse Explained* 325). Prayers were not a separate or distinct form of worship with the Most Ancient people, they were an intrinsic and inseparable part of it; they talked with God as it were face to face, and prayers are nothing else than talking with God (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535).

But all of that changed when people fell into evil, and the voice of the Lord was heard only by a selected few. People still continued to pray. But their prayers became more and more a distinct and separate form of worship. Many prayers were ordained by God in the written Word; set prayers were given for perpetual use, to be offered at certain times of the day, such as the morning and evening. But many prayers were the outcries of troubled hearts and confused minds in devotional solitude. And though prayers—any form of prayer—were never expressly commanded by God in His Word, it is nevertheless assumed and expected that people should pray. Indeed, the whole of the Word is essentially a book of prayers. And it has always been believed that there is a special virtue and power in prayers.

Yet, there has also been, during the history of humankind, a gradual tendency to regard prayers as meritorious work, an observable mark of personal holiness and piety, something to practice for the sake of appearance. And in the days when the Lord walked the earth, the Pharisees made a public display of this perverted use of prayers. The whole subject of prayer had become so confused that the disciples found it necessary to ask the Lord to teach them to pray. And we know from the Heavenly Doctrines that in the contents of the Lord's Prayer "there are more things than the universal heaven is capable of comprehending." The Heavenly Doctrines also reveal that our understanding of, and benefit from, repeating that prayer, are in direct proportion to our ability and willingness to turn to the Lord in His Word and open our minds to the reception of the truths of heaven. Indeed, this is true of every form of prayer.

For every aspect or form of prayer is contained in the Lord's Prayer. In it the Lord teaches us to confess our sins; to adore His Divine majesty, and to acknowledge our own unworthiness and inability to be victorious in temptation. It also teaches us to supplicate His pardon and forgiveness, to ask for His Divine blessings, and, when receiving them, to offer up prayers of thanksgiving. And, finally, although deeply concealed, there is the element of intercession, informing us that it is not disorderly to pray for others.

In general, we may "classify" prayers into prayers of adoration, by which we express our sense of Divine majesty and the absolute perfection of the Lord in His Divine Human; prayers of confession, by which we acknowledge our fallen nature and utter dependence on the Lord's mercy; prayers of supplication, by which we pray for forgiveness and for desired blessings; prayers of thanksgiving, by which we express our gratitude to the Lord for the countless blessings of life; and, finally, prayers of intercession, by which we express our concern for others. Each of these five general forms of prayer contain within them endless arcana. Our finite understanding of the appropriate way in which to approach the Lord in prayer can be improved upon forever.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Is it appropriate to intercede for others? Is it according to Divine order to pray for acquaintances, friends, and relatives in need or in distress? In many places in the letter of the Word it seems to say that not only is it appropriate, but that it is a Divine injunction. In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord said, "Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). The priest Samuel thought of it as a horrible sin not to pray for the children of Israel when he said,

“Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (I Samuel 12:23).

Yet, the internal, spiritual meaning of these, and similar statements in the letter of the Word, is not the *need* for intercession, or even the *appropriateness* of intercession, but the instruction that we ought to do good from charity even to our enemies. Also, we are told that the Lord alone knows the proper means through which all His children may progress in freedom toward His eternal ends. It is the spirit of hatred that the Lord admonishes us to shun whenever He speaks of praying for others in His Word. Perhaps, in a more specific sense, to pray for others means to ask for enlightenment in cooperating with the Lord in His perpetual efforts to save. In the act of praying for others the Lord imparts to us a willingness to forgive, and an unwillingness to turn our back on our fellow human beings.

The Lord Himself prayed for, or made intercession for, the human race, and especially for those who had accepted Him as the promised Messiah. “I pray for them; I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.... Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are (John 17:9,11).

But we must realize that this prayer was offered by the Lord on earth when He was in a state of humiliation, for He spoke to or with the Father as if with another only in that state. But in His states of glorification the Lord does not intercede.

Reflecting upon this, we may come to realize that intercession is a quality of truth rather than good; it was a form of prayer offered by the Lord on earth before He was fully glorified, or when He spoke from the Human rather than from the Divine. It was the Divine truth that interceded with the Divine good. And, as we know, it is the revealed Word that intercedes between angels and men. The Word is the nexus through which the two worlds are conjoined. And, because we do not know the spiritual state of our fellow human beings, prayers for others that are orderly should never be discouraged.

Yet, at the same time, it is important that that we understand the knowledges about prayers that are of no avail. It is revealed that it is human, when weathering the storms and temptations of life, to resort to prayers alone, thus seeking to by-pass and avoid the actual battle against the evil or disorder that caused the storm. Prayers offered in such false hopes are of no avail; to pray for deliverance *without an active life of repentance* is contrary to order.

Strictly speaking, however, there is no specific form of prayer that we may term prayers of intercession. For there is intercession in all love. Divine truth—the Word—has always been with God. He who loves or feels compassion continually intercedes; the element of intercession is present in all love.

No person’s life is completely void of trials and temptations. The Lord alone knows which, or what kind of, trials and temptations most effectively can cause a person to turn away from inherited and acquired evils. In our imperfect and unregenerate states we may strongly feel that someone we love is given a greater share of hardships and sorrows than he deserves, and therefore pray to the Lord that he might be delivered. And, as indicated above, there is absolutely

nothing wrong in going to the Lord in prayer with everything that weighs on our mind. Yet, Solomon, best known for his wisdom, was Divinely inspired to teach us that our prayers, however sincere and humble, often partake of hopes and desires that are contrary to Divine ends. Solomon prayed to the Lord many times; he poured out the desires and wishes of his heart before the Lord and prayed that He might hear him. But he also humbly acknowledged that his prayers might not be in harmony with the Lord's eternal ends, and for this he asked to be forgiven.

It is this humble acknowledgment that makes prayers meaningful and powerful in our struggles in life. It is in this spirit that we can go to the Lord in prayer, talking with Him about all our needs, all our hopes, and all our desires. For it is through a continuing life of prayer that we can gradually learn what to pray for and what not to pray for. Prayers will forever be important to our spiritual peace and happiness. And the Lord can enlighten us through our prayers to the extent that we can pray with Solomon of old, "O Lord my God...hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, FORGIVE."

*Amen.*

Lessons: 1 Kings 8:22-40; John 17; *Apocalypse Revealed* 376.

*Prayer considered in itself is speech with God, and at such time some internal intuition of the objects of prayer, to which there corresponds a certain similar influx into the perception or thought of the mind of him who prays, so that there is a certain opening of man's interiors towards God; but this with a difference according to man's state, and according to the essence of the object of the prayer; if the prayer be from love and faith, and be about and for celestial and spiritual things only, then in the prayer there exists something resembling a revelation, which is manifested in the emotion of the person praying, as to hope, consolation, or a certain interior joy. (Arcana Coelestia 2535)*