

# THE NATURE OF PRAYER

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It is the hope and expectation of everyone to live forever in heaven. Our lives on this earth prepare us for that happy state as we are regenerated by the Lord. Regeneration itself is the shunning of evils as sins, and the doing of good works to help our neighbors. One aspect of regeneration that is especially important is prayer. Prayer is a reminder that in regeneration we are not alone; the Lord is constantly with us, aiding us in every possible way. For by prayer we do not mean only formal prayers in church, but also all of our speech with the Lord. Prayer can never be limited to any building or even any time of day. The Lord is always with us, and so we can always speak with Him. In a sense, prayer is our link with the Lord; it makes it possible for us to communicate with Him, tell Him what we care about, what we are thinking. And it allows us to ask Him for help in our lives. The Lord, through prayer, can be ever present, for whenever we need Him, whenever we feel the desire to call upon Him, He will be with us.

Yet many have felt that prayer is not very useful. The Lord Himself said in Matthew: “Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (6:9). If He is omnipresent (present everywhere) and also omniscient (knowing all things), why should we bother to pray? The answer lies in the way the Lord leads people to do what is good. It is of His Divine Providence that we should first want something, think about it, and then ask the Lord for it *before* He provides it for us.

There is much that the Lord gives us without our asking, but many of the most important things in life we must first ask for, or else the Lord cannot give them to us. In this we should never think of the Lord as some kind of tyrant. He is not some overpowering force that operates upon us whether we want Him to or not. Although He is constantly working to bring the best out of whatever happens, the Lord does not force us to accept Him. Indeed, He allows us so much freedom that we may even reject Him and spend an eternity in the hell of self love. This is why He requires us to ask Him, for otherwise we would not accept His offerings of aid.

Imagine what life would be like if, every time we wanted something, it were miraculously provided, without any effort of our own. How much respect would we have for what is given us in this way? Would we not take everything for granted? Also, think of our precious freedom. How would we feel if every time we needed help, it suddenly appeared? What would happen to us if every time we were learning to do something new, like cook or play baseball, someone were supervising all our actions, telling us exactly what to do, and every time we did something wrong they quickly corrected us? Would we not feel trapped if we were not free to make mistakes? We need to feel that all our ideas are our own, and this is why the Lord will not force Himself upon us when we do not invite Him into our lives.

Since prayer is speaking with the Lord, what should we speak with Him about? A good beginning is to make use of the Lord’s prayer. This prayer was given to us by the Lord Himself, and it contains, in general, all that we need to ask of Him. This should be our daily prayer. In addition, if we want some concrete examples of things that we can pray for, we should turn to the book of Psalms in the Word. The Psalms are poems or songs that were chanted to the Lord. In many of these there are praises to the Lord, and this is one kind of prayer—glorifying the Lord. Such prayers help us realize just how powerful He is, and how dependent upon Him we are. There are also psalms of thankfulness, and we too should have prayers in which we remember all that the Lord has given us and humbly thank Him for it. And then there are also many psalms asking for help. Most of our prayers will be like this, for we seem to need the Lord most whenever we are facing some problem which we cannot solve or when something has happened that disturbs us.

It may even seem at times that we remember the Lord in prayer *only* when we want something from Him. We may begin to feel guilty about this, thinking that if we cannot remember Him when we are happy, then we have no right to ask His help when things are going wrong. It is understandable to feel this way, but it is like saying that since I have not spoken with an old friend in a long time, I should ignore him whenever I see him. Even if we call upon the Lord only when we are troubled, He will still listen to our prayers asking for help.

But in our prayers that ask for His aid, what should we ask for? First off, we can ask Him to be present with us. When asking for help, we usually feel that we have been deserted and are very lonely. We may think that no one else could ever have experienced what we're going through, and that no one can appreciate our problems. We may feel isolated from other people and think that the Lord is very far away. This is why we may often find ourselves asking Him to be near to us. To ask this is to acknowledge that we do need someone's help, that we want a friend. Naturally, then, we will be asking the Lord to guide us. When we are tempted to do something that is wrong, we should ask Him to guide our hearts so that we come to want only what is good. If we are confused and our thinking is unclear, then we should ask Him to guide our thoughts, to straighten out our ideas. We may even ask Him to guide our actions, perhaps asking Him to help us say the "right" thing, or to do what will be most helpful to others.

What we should especially ask for is instruction. Often we think that only *we* know what is best for ourselves. We think that no one else could possibly understand. But this is wrong; the Lord always knows and understands, and we should ask Him to help us see what we ought to do. We should ask His help in learning new truths, so that it is a delightful adventure, rather than a boring job. And then we should ask that He enlighten our minds about what we have learned, that we may have a deep understanding of the truth to see how it can be lived in our lives. In this way, we are asking the Lord to show us how to become better people.

In addition, we then need to ask the Lord to give us the power to become better. We should ask Him for the strength to resist our evils. This is an important thing, for sometimes we may think that we can get rid of all our evils, all our bad habits, with very little work. We may even think that we can do it all by ourselves. But when we ask the Lord to help us to keep from doing wrong and to do what is right, then we are admitting that, by ourselves, we are too weak to fight against all our evils and that we are dependent upon Him.

Now all these things that the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church encourages us to pray for have to do with our own spiritual state—the kind of person we are becoming. But what of our natural, material state? What of our bodies and worldly needs? Is it right to pray for good health, good grades in school, happy relationships with others, money for buying clothes and other things? These are difficult questions to answer with a simple "yes" or "no." A general principle is that the Lord in His Divine providence thinks only of things that have eternal value. He looks to the salvation of our souls, to our eternal happiness and usefulness in heaven. This is His goal, and He considers all things of this world in relation to it. If something does not work directly toward these ends, then it is not very important. But, if natural things, such as good health, food, and clothing, do affect our spiritual state, then they are important. This should be our guide as to whether something is worth asking the Lord for. If something in this natural world is important to our progress in regeneration, then yes, we should pray for it. But if what we want will not help us in any way in regeneration, then why should the Lord help us get it? Remember what the Lord told His followers: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on.... But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:25,33). This is not to say that natural things of the world are evil. But it is saying that we should think about what is really valuable in life before we ask the Lord for something.

Another rule of thumb that might help us know what to ask of the Lord is to look to use. We are taught in the Heavenly Doctrine that the angels in heaven ask only for things that will be useful, and we should do the same. One other important thing for us to remember in our prayers is to end them as the Lord did His in Gethsemane: “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). This can help us realize that no matter what we ask of the Lord, He can provide only good things for us. By ending in this way, we are saying that only the Lord knows what is best for *us*, and that even if His answer to our prayers is not exactly what we had intended, we will not be angry about it but will trust Him to guide our ways.

But what about prayer for other people? Many have thought that just asking the Lord to help ourselves is somewhat selfish, and that we should spend most of our prayers on other people who need help more than we do. There is a problem with this way of thinking. For one thing, praying for ourselves does not have to be selfish at all. Yes, if we ask only for unimportant worldly things, then our prayers are selfish, and the Lord will not listen to them. But, when we pray from a sincere heart, we are doing something that is not selfish at all, for by asking the Lord for help, we are reaching outside of ourselves. Although it may not seem so at first, prayer is one of the most unselfish things a person can do, for when we pray, we are telling the Lord that we know that without His help we could not be saved.

Another mistake is in thinking that other people are in more need of the Lord’s aid than ourselves. We are then making some type of spiritual judgment about them. We do not know if they are spiritually any better or worse off than we are. What we are usually judging is their *material* well-being. Yet how important are worldly success and riches? Poor people are obviously not less regenerate than rich people!

But does this mean that we should not pray for others? No, it does not. The Heavenly Doctrine itself tells us that one aspect of charity is wishing well for others, and isn’t this a kind of prayer? We are also told to pray for the coming of the Lord’s New Church on earth, which means to pray that other people will come to see the truth of the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church and become better people for it. It certainly cannot do any *harm* to pray for others, but what *effect* can our prayers for them have? Again, this is a difficult question to answer easily. For one thing, if we pray for someone else and they know about it, surely that will have a positive effect, making them feel that someone cares about them, and this could easily help them. Also, when we think of someone, we are actually close to them, even if separated by space in this world. To pray for another brings us closer to them spiritually, and it may even have some influence upon the spirits who are present with them. Yet we should always recall that by praying for someone else, we are not causing the Lord to help them any more than He would have without our prayers. We cannot pressure the Lord through prayer into doing something which He might otherwise not have done. Prayers for ourselves should never have this in mind either. When we ask anything of the Lord, we should not expect that our prayer will change His mind or cause Him to give us some “special” break. His Divine Providence is working for everyone throughout the universe, billions of people, and He will not favor one person over another, for He loves us all equally.

So what good is it to pray for others? The same as it is to pray for ourselves. It is good *for us*. This is the real use of prayer. It can cause us to realize how dependent we are upon the Lord. It makes us think of Him and not just of ourselves. Through prayer we become more humble people and more open to the Lord’s leading. It helps us to listen to Him, for by praying we may reflect upon what is really important in life. Then the Lord can gently lead us to see what is of use, what is truly valuable. This is one of the answers that the Lord gives us when we pray. He can flow into our minds, causing us to see truths in a new way. He can also then draw us up into a heavenly sphere, and we will begin to feel consolation if we have been depressed or unhappy, and also hope and an inward joy.

Prayer has an additional side benefit: it helps us realize that we have free choice, that things are not unchangeable. If we thought that all things were decided or predestined before our births, and that we had

virtually no free choice, there would be almost no point in prayer. But, by speaking with the Lord, we sense that things can change, we can change and have a new and more useful effect upon those around us. Perhaps new ideas will come into our minds while in prayer, or afterwards we will see something that we had overlooked before. There will not be some actual voice speaking to us, telling us exactly what to do and think. All our direct answers can be found in the Word. But prayer helps us to see truths that we previously had not understood or remembered. It also brings us peace when we seem to be surrounded by problems, so that we then have the strength to go out and face all our difficulties. These are the good effects of prayer—prayer that comes from a sincere heart.

But what if our prayers do not seem to be answered in these ways? What does it tell us about them and ourselves? Well, we should not jump to any conclusions. If we do not see answers to our prayer, if we do not immediately feel uplifted or enlightened, it does not mean they have not been heard and answered. For one thing, we may not be aware of the answer that has been given us, because we were not looking for it. We may have expected something quite different from what we received, and so thought that the Lord did not hear us. This is one of the values in ending the prayer with the wish that the Lord's will be done. It reminds us that the answers might be something quite unexpected. But there are other reasons why prayers might not be answered. We could be asking for selfish things in a very confused state of mind, and these prayers the Lord cannot answer. It could be a time of temptation for us, and our prayers might be self serving. We might be praying for ourselves and against others. Recall that the Lord encouraged us to pray for our enemies, meaning that we should never pray for evil to come to anyone. The Lord regards our hearts when we pray, not just what comes out of our lips. He knows when our prayers are hypocritical, coming from a wrong motive.

And what if we never pray? Can we be regenerated without prayer? No, we can never come fully into the Lord's heavenly kingdom until we realize how much we need Him and ask that He help us. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that we must pray, or else we are not humble enough to be received in heaven. Although we have enough power and strength to begin resisting our evils, if we do not ask the Lord for help, then we will become conceited and think that we can do it all ourselves. We cannot resist our evils for long unless we ask the Lord to help us, for He is the only One who can finally defeat them, and He cannot do this until we ask Him to.

Prayer, then, can be invaluable in our lives. By speaking with the Lord in all our stages of life, it can bring us closer to Him. It can comfort and help us to overcome evil in temptations, for it is a reminder of how dependent we are upon Him. Through prayer we can receive the gift of heavenly life, for it inspires us to continue shunning our evils and gives us strength to do what is right—to be regenerated.

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*The love of God goes out and extends itself, not only to good persons and good things, but also to evil persons and evil things; consequently, not only to those persons and things that are in heaven, but also to those that are in hell...for God is everywhere, and from eternity to eternity the same.*

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