



“When You Pray”
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Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.

On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.¹

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Luke 11:10-13

“For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”²

Emanuel Swedenborg, Apocalypse Explained §325, 493

Worship does not consist in prayers and in external devotion, but in a life of charity; this is because the quality of people’s prayers is such as they themselves are in respect to life.

It matters not that a person bears himself humbly, that he kneels and sighs when he prays; for these are externals, and unless externals proceed from internals they are only gestures and sounds without life.

In each thing a person says or does, his affections lie hidden; the quality of the affection determines the quality of the prayer.

Spiritual affection is what is called charity toward the neighbor; to be in that affection is true worship; praying is what proceeds.

Truth is what prays in a person, and a person is continually at prayer when he lives according to truth.³

² Ibid.

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Apocalypse Explained*. London: The Swedenborg Society, 1968.

There is an ambiguity to prayer; a paradox. And I suspect you have all considered it before. What constitutes authentic prayer? There is the prayer of the small child for a certain birthday gift; there is the prayer of the gambler, deep in debt, praying for a good hand; there is the prayer for financial and athletic success; and there is the prayer for loved one undergoing surgery: which one is authentic, which not?

We all know what prayer isn't. New Church doctrine and common sense agree in this: prayer for the wrong thing, or in the wrong spirit, cannot and does not work; it's not really prayer to begin with. Swedenborgian or not, the simplistic, pious images of the past are transparent to our age. What is not so commonly agreed on is what prayer really is, in a positive sense.

A few years ago, Annie Lamotte suggested that there are essentially three type of prayer: Please, Thank You, and Wow!

We all know about *Please*: prayers of petition, prayers in which we ask for something we need or want. We ask for many things, and the needs are many. They are simple and innocent requests, or deeply desperate pleas. All prayers of petition arise from genuine need: material, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. Whether that need is reasonable or good for us is often another matter.

And we all know about *Thank You*: prayers of gratitude, prayers in which we acknowledge our debt to God or others. We are grateful for many things, and the blessings are many. I'm not so sure about "*Wow*." By it she seems to refer to moments of awe, inspiration,

transcendence, when we are taken out of ourselves and glimpse the scale and wonder of the universe. But to me this seems more like another form of “thank you,” a prayer of gratitude.

Swedenborg and tradition offer a slightly different trine: Petition, gratitude, and *contrition!*

The following terms have fallen out of favor in our modern age, esp. in the last 30 years or so: confession, repentance, guilt, contrition, acknowledgment of (our) sin, penance, etc. For as long as anyone can remember, worship services, whether Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant, would begin with words of confession, prayers of repentance. (Consider also the centrality of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in Judaism, or the sacrament of confession in the Catholic Church.)

In seminary (30 years ago!), we learned the three stages of liturgy: the humble approach, the Divine message, and the application to life: confession from the heart, truth from the Word, and meaning from the pulpit. Confession, etc., only makes sense if we are moral agents, accountable to God, to the truth, and to each other. And if we are moral agents, and we stumble, then confession becomes essential.

An old message: before we can receive the light and heat of God’s love and wisdom, we must first remove all that blocks/obstructs its entrance; we must clear the way. Before we can open the door and let the Lord in, we must first unlock it.

Those familiar with Swedenborg’s theology recognize repentance as the first and essential step in regeneration (repentance, reformation, regeneration). To turn on the light, to set our house in order. To look within, to see ourselves in the light of truth, to examine our motives, and to align them with God’s will. To make an honest appraisal of just where we are,

how far we might have strayed from God, from the truth. And it is only confession and repentance which leads to genuine forgiveness, the freedom to begin again, to move in a new direction.

God's love and truth are constantly flowing into each of us (it's why we're alive!). Like a sun that never sets, all we need is always available. (All we need to be authentic, sincere, truly human, not a phony hypocrite or deluded materialist . . .) This is why we need only unlock and open the door, ask, seek. Once we set our inner life in order through confession and repentance, we know better what to ask for, and what to be truly grateful for. It is confession which leads us to voice genuine prayers of petition and gratitude.

In our reading from Luke, God is compared to a parent: this is tricky. God is *like* a parent, but not like any parent we know, A parent can anticipate a child's needs, but not all of them, and may not be able to meet all of them; they don't know the child like God knows *us*.

In CPE, we were each asked to describe motherhood, the ideal mother. This took between 3-5 minutes. We were then asked to describe *our* mother. Two hours later, all the Kleenexes were gone, a wide variety of sadness and anger had been expressed, and everyone was so exhausted that we quit for the day! It turns out that real people rarely measure up to the universal ideal.

Except, the church is bold to say, in the case of Jesus of Nazareth. One who not only preached the truth, not only practiced what he preached, but actually *became* the truth he preached. One in whom the ideal and the real, the divine and the human, have become one; the visible God in whom is the invisible God. By submitting himself completely to the Divine Will, the Divine Love and Wisdom, he revealed to us a God of infinite mercy, compassion and

wisdom, in human form: the Son of God. When he tells us to address God as Father, he knows what he's talking about.

Some parents are better than others, but all are imperfect. All are still evolving, growing, learning on the job; still unconscious to some degree; all fall short of God's glory/perfection. But most find countless ways to reflect this love in the life of their children, even if imperfectly.

Prayer does not conform the world to our will; neither should it lead us to be conformed to the world's standards; rather, it should lead us to be transformed, to conform to God's will (thy will be done.) And from there, we can be a transformative agent in the world. If we seek first the kingdom of God, starting with repentance, all these things shall be added to you. That is to say, once we are grounded in God's will, we begin to see that we all need – to be loving, wise, compassionate and just human beings – will be made available to us. And then we will come to know authentic gratitude as well.

Prayer eventually leads us to a deeper awareness of reality, of God. In this way, authentic prayer is transformative; not of our circumstances, but of our perspective. Authentic prayer asks not that struggles be removed, but that we might find help in overcoming them. It leads not to bargaining but to acceptance.

*The more external a prayer is, the more it resembles a transaction, buying and selling
The more internal a prayer is, the more it resembles a transformation, the beginning of new life.*

We can confront prayer, challenge its reality and effectiveness, its reasonableness; we can question it, and we should. But once we receive an answer, once we have pierced the surface meaning of prayer and opened ourselves to its real meaning, then be ready: for prayer will confront and challenge us as to *our* reality and *our* effectiveness, *our* “reasonableness” in

spiritual matters. Real prayer questions us, bringing us to face the reality and truth of ourselves: that we are spiritual beings, and that we can and should be living quite differently, with different goals, understandings, relationships; and perhaps most importantly, with a greater acknowledgment of our dependence on God, a power greater than ourselves, as a child is dependent upon his parent.

Many people turn to prayer as a last resort, after they have exhausted their own power and wits. Let us be quick to turn to prayer as a first response, after we realize and accept that God rules all to begin with.