

THE TRUE LORD'S PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

If a number of Christians were asked to repeat the Lord's Prayer some might begin, "Now I lay me down to sleep," but most would say, "Our Father which art in heaven," for this is universally called *The Lord's Prayer*. Actually it is not the Lord's prayer at all, it is the disciples' prayer. It is the prayer the Lord gave us to pray. But the true Lord's Prayer is in John 17. It has been called "the holy of holies" of the New Testament, for in the shadow of the cross, our Lord gathers with his disciples in the Upper Room and in their presence prays with them unto the Father.

I never read this passage without a sense of awe and reverence, and perhaps therein lies a considerable danger, for if we habitually approach this passage with a sense of its majesty and beauty, our own sense of awe tends to remove us from the message of this great prayer. We miss the message because we are afraid to explore in depth what our Lord is saying. But if this has been your experience, as I confess it has been mine, we defeat the very purpose our Lord envisioned when he prayed this prayer. For he deliberately prayed this prayer aloud in the presence of his disciples because he wanted them to hear it, for the basic relationships that he expresses in this prayer between him and the Father are also the relationships that obtain between Jesus and us. There is a very real sense in which every believer in Jesus Christ can pray this prayer! This prayer was designed to teach us how to pray, and the sense of awe which would remove this from us and reserve it only for his lips is a defeating thing that causes us to miss the whole value of the prayer.

The first three verses of this prayer set forth the background out of which the prayer arises, a background of danger and death. It was uttered a few moments before Jesus left the Upper Room, and, with his disciples, went down into the dark valley of the Kidron and across onto the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Ascending there in the darkness of the night he found his way into the Garden of Gethsemane. There, withdrawing himself from the disciples for a brief space, he prayed that desperate prayer in Gethsemane, the prayer which wrung the blood from his very body, falling in great drops to the ground, and he passed into a time of mysterious and terrible anguish. To that garden, Judas came with the guards who took him prisoner and led him to Pilate's judgment hall and to the cross.

Now he is facing the shadow of the cross when he prays this prayer. The disciples are subdued and terrified. They have sensed that something is wrong, that he is going to leave them. He has told them that he is leaving and their hearts are wretched with fear and anxiety. But in his prayer there is not a word of fear or weakness or nervousness expressed.

I have in my library a copy of the prayer that Martin Luther uttered before he appeared before the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the City of Worms, to answer charges against him for which his very life was at stake. It is a long, rambling, repetitive cry of helpless weakness in which Luther simply casts himself over and over again upon God for strength and cries out in fear and anguish. But this prayer of Jesus is entirely different. Instead of a cry of weakness, or a plea for help, this prayer begins with a powerful awareness of anticipated opportunity:

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come;" {John 17:1a RSV}

"The hour has come." With these words Jesus looks forward with obvious anticipation to a time of boundless opportunity that lies before him. Surely these words, "the hour has come" mean a good deal more than the phrase we employ when we face the end of life, "My time has come." By that we mean we have come to the end of our rope, the end of life. Dr. J. Vernon McGee once told of a man who had been studying through the doctrine of predestination and had become so entranced by the idea of God's sovereign protection of the believer under any and every circumstance that he said to Dr. McGee, "You know, I am so convinced that God is keeping me no matter what I do, that I think that I could step right out into the midst of the busiest traffic at

noontime and, if my time had not come, I would be perfectly safe." Dr. McGee said, very characteristically, "Well, if you go down and stand in the middle of traffic at noontime, brother, your time has come!"

To use a phrase like, "my time has come" is resignation, but this is not what Jesus does. What he is speaking of here is realization. He is speaking of the time he had been looking forward to all his life, the hour of boundless possibilities, the hour he had long awaited. Through the record of the Gospels he continually refers to this hour: In the beginning of John we have the story of the first miracle in Cana of Galilee when he turned the water into wine. There his mother came to him and said, "Son, they have no wine," and his answer was, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come," {cf, John 2:3-4 KJV}. He meant that, though he would perform what his mother had suggested, it would not have the results that she anticipated, for the hour had not yet come, the time had not struck. Again and again he said to the disciples, "Mine hour is not yet," {cf, John 7:30, 8:20}. He was awaiting a time when opportunity would abound, and now, as he comes to the cross, he lifts his eyes unto the heavens and says, "Father, the hour has come." By that he meant the hour in which all that he had lived for would begin to be fulfilled.

This was an anticipation based upon the principle, as he once put it, "except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit," {cf, John 12:24}. This is why his hour had not come before, for Jesus knew that God's work is never accomplished apart from the principle of death, that all that he did of mighty miracles and the mighty words, all the marvelous power of his ministry among men would be totally ineffective until he had passed through the experience of giving up all that he was. Until that was accomplished, nothing lasting would remain. Beyond the cross, Jesus knew, lay the glory of God. Hebrews says he "endured the cross, despising the shame" {Heb 12:2} of it, knowing that beyond it lay the joy which he was awaiting. Beyond the cross lies glory, but the cross is the only way to it. All of his ministry, all of his life, would be ineffective until he had fulfilled this principle of death. Except a corn of wheat die, it abideth alone, it never will do anything else, it cannot! Only if it die does it bring forth fruit. Beyond the surrender of his rights lay the possession of privilege, beyond the obedient act was the realized blessing.

This is why I said that we also must pray this prayer, for we are always coming to hours like this in our lives. Both in minor and major ways we come to the place where we must say, as Jesus, "Father, the hour has come -- the hour where I must make a choice as to whether I shall hold my life for myself to act in self-centeredness as I have been doing all along, or whether I shall fling it away, and, passing into what is apparent death, lay hold of the hope and the glory and the realization that lies beyond it." These hours are always coming to us. We call them disappointments, set-backs, tragedies, perhaps. We think of them as invasions of our privacy, our right to live our own lives. But if we see them as Jesus saw them, we will recognize that each moment like this is an hour of great possibility which, if we will act on the principle of giving away ourselves, we shall discover opens a door to a vast and an almost unimaginable realm of service and blessing and glory. That is what Jesus means when he says "The hour is come." It was a time of abounding opportunity.

Then he passes from that to another word. He says,

"glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him." {John 17:1b-2 RSV}

By this he reveals that he speaks out of an awareness of an adequate relationship. If you look at that verse very carefully you will notice a marvelous interplay of personality. The Father gives to the Son in order that the Son may give back to the Father. It is not a once-for-all giving in which the Father once gave the Son power over all flesh, but it is a continuous giving. The Father, he says, is continually giving to the Son power over all flesh. Why? In order that the Son may continually give back to the Father the men whom the Father gives to him, that they may be his. And what he is expressing here in this marvelous language is simply that his entire ministry is a manifestation of adequate power for any demand.

The Father gave him power. What for? In order, he says, that he might give eternal life to whomever the Father has given him; that he might meet the need of any who come to him. Those that are sent of the Father, drawn of the Father, shall come to him. Whoever it may be, Jesus says, there is indwelling him by the gift of the Father everything that is necessary to meet the demand that person may make. He is equal to any problem, whatever it may be.

This last week in Newport Beach, I was in a social gathering in a beautiful home. A man came up to me and seized my hand and drew me off into the corner. He said, "I want to talk with you. I have been to the prayer breakfast every morning this week and I want to ask you some questions." I was delighted, of course, and urged him to tell me a bit about himself. He was a man who had what I can only describe as a tragic face. There were lines of deep tragedy written in his face, and I soon found out what it was. He told me that his seventeen year old son, just a few months before, had committed suicide, and what this had meant to his wife and himself. As we talked he said, "I know that this week I have heard something that must be an answer. I cannot deny that what I have been hearing all week long in the lives of these men is real. There is something here, and I want this, I want to come to Christ, but I cannot come." I said, "Why not?" and he said, "I do not feel I can come until I can come in utter honesty and frankness. I have a great deal of doubt, and some resentment and bitterness about what has happened to us and I do not think I can come." And I said to him, "My dear friend, if you do not feel you can come honestly, then come dishonestly and tell Christ so, for the invitation of the gospel is, 'Whosoever will, let him come,' that's all, 'let him come,'" {cf, Rev 22:17}.

There is in Jesus Christ an adequate answer to any problem. You don't have the answer but you don't need to have, he does. Bring the problem to him, whatever it may be -- doubt, unbelief, dishonesty, fear, bitterness, anxiety, worry, whatever it is. Jesus said,

"Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt 11:28 {RSV})

And he also said,

"All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out." (John 6:37 {RSV})

What does he mean? That in this marvelous relationship in which he lived his life on earth, the Father was forever giving him power over all flesh, over every one that came -- an adequate answer for every need -- that he in turn, in meeting that need, might give that man back to the Father, having received him as a gift of the Father to himself.

Do you recognize that we stand in exactly the same relationship to the Lord Jesus as he stood to his Father? Last week we heard his words,

"He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father." { John 14:12b KJV}

All he is saying is that, in the indwelling of the life of Jesus Christ in us, he is ready to be continually giving to us all power over all flesh, whatever the need is. Whatever demand life makes upon us, whatever urgent problem comes bearing down on our lives, pressing us down, he is adequate for it, in order that we might give back to him the joy and the rejoicing and the glorying and the thanksgiving of our heart.

Major Ian Thomas has reminded us, "We must have what he is in order to do what he did."

This is the secret of vital Christianity. Even in this hour of danger and death and darkness, when the cross presses with all its confusing bewilderment upon the Lord Jesus, he prays to the Father and says, "Thank you, Father, the hour has come, the hour which will mean the greatest blessing the world has ever seen, the hour for which I have waited, the hour for which I have lived, and I know that, in the facing of it, I stand in an adequate relationship which is fully able to meet the demands of that hour."

Then there is a third thing with which he introduces this prayer. A third impetus behind this prayer is the unveiling of an abounding possibility:

"And this is eternal life, that they may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." {John 17:3 RSV}

If a Christian wishes to give a testimony, he says, "I have eternal life." What does he mean? What is eternal life? You have eternal life, you say, well, what is it? Would you say, "Well, it means I will live forever." Is that what eternal life really is? Is it nothing but eternal existence going on and on forever? Is it life on cloud nine spent throughout eternity, strumming a harp, is that eternal life? Is it physically walking the golden streets?

No, the definition is right here. Jesus says this is eternal life: What? "That they may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." That is eternal life!

Eternal life is not quantity, it is quality. It is knowing a Person. When you stop to think about it, that is all that makes life worth while, isn't it? What is marriage? Is it three meals a day, bathing the children, watching TV, going to sleep and getting up and going to work in the morning and coming back again? Is that marriage? No, marriage is knowing another person. That is the essence.

It has been over twenty years ago since, as a young man, I visited a church in Montana and sat on a balcony one fateful Sunday evening, and from the Olympian heights from which I was seated, I saw a beautiful young girl with long, blonde hair, singing a solo. She had the most angelic voice I had ever heard. I said to myself, in the impetuosity of youth, "There is the girl I want to marry." But I felt a terrible sense of frustration, for I knew the next morning I was scheduled to leave for Chicago to make my residence there. After the meeting was dismissed I met that girl in the doorway of the church -- we had only been introduced briefly a day or two before -- and I asked her if I could write to her. I think she was very surprised, but she said, "Yes," and after I arrived at Chicago I began to write to her. I wrote, off and on, for quite a number of years, five or six years. Eventually I found myself in Hawaii still writing to the same girl. It took all that time to persuade her to come to Hawaii, and there we were married. I had been attempting to know her by correspondence all those years but I did not know very well, but when we were married we began to know each other, and the whole joy of marriage for me is the knowledge of another person.

Marriages which do not have that element in them disintegrate and become nothing but a boring, frustrating experience. It is in knowing a person that there is richness added to life. That is why eternal life is the knowledge of an eternal Person, the intimacy of communion and fellowship with the Person of God. "This is eternal life, that they may know thee the only true God."

What are the results of knowledge like that? Whether between humans or between a man and God, they are always the same, except that in the case of knowing God they extend to infinite boundaries:

The first is enjoyment; life becomes enjoyable. Knowing another person means the end of loneliness. It means a sympathizing heart, someone to whom we may tell our problems and who will share our joys and our woes. There is no quality in life like it. That is what knowing God is, the fullness of enjoyment, the richest of experiences.

But more than enjoyment, it means enlargement. Have you not observed that someone who is withdrawn from others, who lives a hermit life, either in actual isolation or by being withdrawn and unapproachable, also lives a very narrow life? His life is bounded by fixed habits on the north and unchangeable attitudes on the south and that is the whole of life -- a narrow grave with both ends kicked out. But when we come to know other persons, and especially when we come to know God, life is enlarged. It takes on breadth as well as length. We discover that the knowledge of God broadens the whole perspective of life, till we begin to live for the first time. This is the testimony of many.

A few weeks ago I was up on the Canadian border speaking to a group of young adults at a Snow Conference. After one of the meetings a young man came up to me. I learned later that he was a relatively new convert, a young man who had been a test pilot and who had lived a rather wild life. After a message in which I had spoken about the knowledge of God, he said to me, "You know, I like that. You are talking about God differently than anyone I have heard before. You don't make him sound like he is off there somewhere. When I was listening to you I could see that God ... (and then he groped for a word) God ... God swings!" I must have looked a little mystified, so he added, "Well, you know what I mean. He's with it, God's with it, God swings!" Now I understood immediately that there was not the slightest bit of irreverence in what he said. All

he was saying was that God is intended for life. He has come to enlarge our lives and if we do not yield to Him we discover that life becomes a constantly narrowing, restricted channel that has nothing of breadth in it at all.

The knowledge of a person adds enjoyment and enlargement, but most of all, enrichment, for life must not only have length and breadth, but it must also have depth. As we come to know God through Jesus Christ (for there is no other way to the knowledge of God except through Jesus Christ -- He said so himself, "and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" {cf, Matt 11:27}) as we give ourselves to the fellowship and obedience of Jesus Christ, we discover that life becomes enriched by him in all dimensions. He becomes a warm and flaming life within us, and perhaps for the first time we begin to experience what human life was intended to be.

Again this week I sat with a Christian man, one of the members of the group that has been behind the planning of the meetings held last week in Newport Beach. We were eating lunch together and he told me the story of his life, how he became a Christian. He told me how he had sought for the usual successes of life and had achieved them to a considerable degree. He had all the money he needed, he had a fine family, he had all the normal attributes of life, and I discovered later in talking to others about him that he was the image of manliness in the eyes of other men. I shared with him, for his own encouragement, what others had said to me about him. I said, "Why is this?" And tears came to his eyes as he said, "I'll tell you why. If it is true at all, it is because when I was forty-one years of age I discovered Jesus Christ. And I thank God that at forty-one I learned for the first time the true values of life." He said, "I have been impressed with this particularly because my father became a Christian only five days before he died, but those last five days were the most wonderful days of his life. I am simply grateful that, though my father only understood the real values of life for five days, I have been permitted for a number of years to realize what life is all about."

Now that is what the knowledge of God brings. Paul says, "all things are yours: the world, life, death, the present, the future, all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's," {cf, 1 Cor 3:21-23}. What a magnificent panorama. What tremendous possibilities and potentialities lie in this simple relationship with Jesus Christ!

Now my question to you is this:

- Are you praying out of that kind of an understanding, out of that kind of a relationship? Are you seeking to enter into that?
- Do you really believe that these are the possibilities that God is ready to pour into your life?
- Or are you content, as so many of us are, to plod on week after endless week, doing the same old things with the same attitudes as the worldlings around us, with nothing visibly different in our lives?

That is what our Lord confronts us with in this prayer. In the face of the most tragic hour in human history there is nothing of nervousness or defeat in his prayer, but simply a resting upon that which had been the characteristic of his life all along and which he simply says is available for all who believe on him.

Prayer

Our Father, what pathetic beggars we are, possessing such marvelous riches, enjoying so little of them. Lord, strike away the shackles of our unbelief. Stop us from discounting all this that we hear. Keep us from this terrible thing of going back into "normal life," as we call it, and being the same old person that we were before. God help us to see that in Jesus Christ there is life, and light, and liberty, and abundance and make us hunger and thirst for them. We pray in His name. Amen.

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