

## XXXIX.

**The Essence of Prayer.**

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.”—*Ephes. vi. 18.*

In the last place we consider the work of the Holy Spirit in *prayer*.

It appears from Scripture, more than has been emphasized, that in the holy act of prayer there is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit working both *in* us and *with* us. And yet this appears clearly from the apostolic word: “Likewise the *Spirit* helpeth also our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the *Spirit Himself* maketh intercession for us with groanings which can not be uttered. And He that knoweth the heart, knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because *He maketh intercession for the saints* according to the will of God” (*Rom. viii. 26, 27*). Christ expresses this with equal clearness when He teaches the woman of Samaria that “God is a Spirit, and the true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (*John iv. 24*); for, so He adds, “the Father seeketh such to worship Him.” In almost similar sense St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” (*Ephes. vi. 18*)

They already possessed the ancient promise to Zacharias: “And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of *supplication*” (*Zach. xii. 10*). And this promise was fulfilled when the apostle could testify concerning Christ: “For through Him we both have access by *one Spirit* unto the Father” (*Ephes. ii. 18*). In the “Abba, Father” of our prayers the Holy Spirit beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God (*Rom. viii. 15*). And in her longing for the coming of the Bridegroom, not only the Bride, but the *Spirit* and the Bride pray: “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.” Upon closer examination, it appears that prayer can not be separated from the spiritual rule that we must pray: “Not as tho we had received the spirit of the world, but the *Spirit of God*, that we might know the things that are freely given us of God”; a prayer which we then offer, “Not with the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the *Holy Ghost teacheth*, comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (*1 Cor. ii. 12, 13*).

Hence there can be no doubt that even in our prayers we must acknowledge and honor a work of the Holy Spirit; and the special treatment of this tender subject may bear fruit in the exercise of our own prayers. We do not propose, however, to treat here the entire subject of prayer, which belongs to the explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism on this point; but we wish simply to emphasize the significance of the Holy Spirit’s work for the prayers of the saint.



In the first place, we must discover the silver thread that, in the nature of the case, connects the essence of our prayer with the work of the Holy Spirit.

For all prayer is not equal. There is a great difference between the high-priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus and the prayer of the Holy Spirit with groans that can not be uttered. The supplications of the saints on *earth* differ from those of the saints in *heaven*, those who rejoice *before* the throne and those who cry from *under* the altar. Even the prayers of the saints of earth are not the same in the various spiritual conditions from which they pray. There are prayers of the *Bride*, that is, from *all the saints* on earth as a whole; and prayers of the *local assemblies* of believers, supplications from the circles of *brethren* when two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus; and supplications of *individual believers* poured out in the *solitude* of the closet. And distinguished in the root from these prayers of the saints are the prayers of the *still unconverted*, whether regenerate or not, who cry unto God whom they do not know and whom they oppose.

The question is whether the Holy Spirit is active, either in one or in all these prayers. Does He affect our prayers only when, in the rare moments of exalted spiritual life, we have intimate communion with God? Or does He affect only the prayers of the saint, excluding those of the *unconverted*? Or does He affect all prayer and supplication, whether from saint or sinner?

Before we answer this question, it is necessary accurately to define prayer. For prayer may be taken in a *limited* sense, as a religious act requesting something of God, in which case it is merely the expression of a desire springing from a conscious want, void, or need which we ask God to supply; an application to the divine power and providence, in poverty to be enriched, in danger to be protected, in temptation to be kept standing. Or it may be taken in a *wider* sense and include *thanksgiving*. In the Reformed Church the Service of Prayer always includes the Service of Thanksgiving. In this sense the Heidelberg Catechism treats it, calling prayer the chief part of thankfulness (q. 116). In fact, we can scarcely conceive of prayer, in the higher sense, ascending to the Throne of Grace *without* thanksgiving.

Moreover, prayer also includes *praise* and every *outpouring* of the soul. Prayer without praise and thanksgiving is no prayer. In the supplication of saints, *prayer* and *adoration* go together. Oppressed with the multitude of thoughts, the soul may have no definite supplication, or thanksgiving, or hymn of praise, yet frequently feels constrained to pour out those thoughts before the Lord. When, in [Psalm xc.](#), Moses pours out his prayer, there is: (1) a supplication, "Lord how long! and let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants"; (2) thanksgiving, "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations"; (3) praise, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God." And besides these there is (4) an outpouring of the thoughts that fill his soul, "We are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are



we troubled”; and stronger still, “The days of our years are threescore years and ten, and, if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off and we fly away.”

And so we find in the high-priestly prayer of Christ (*John xvii*): (1) a supplication, “And now, O Father, glorify Thou *Me* with Thine own self, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was”; or, “Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given *Me*, that they may be one as We are”; (2) thanksgiving, “Thou hast given *Me* power over all flesh, that I should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given *Me*”; (3) praise, “O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee, and these have known that Thou hast sent *Me*”; (4) and besides these a manifold outpouring of the soul, which is neither prayer, praise, nor thanksgiving, “All Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine”; “I have glorified Thee on the earth; I have finished the work which Thou gavest *Me* to do”; “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.”

We did not assign a special place to the confession of guilt and sin, because this is included in supplication, to which it leads and of which it is the moving cause; while the confession of the soul’s lost condition and natural liability to condemnation necessarily must lead to the pouring out of the soul.

Therefore, speaking comprehensively, we understand by prayer: *every religious act by which we take upon ourselves directly to speak to the Eternal Being.*

The only difficulty is in the Hymn of Praise. For it can not be denied that in a number of psalms there is a direct speaking to God in hymns of praise; and thus the distinction between the Prayer and the Hymn of Praise might be lost sight of.

There are four steps in the Hymn of Praise: it may be a singing of the praise of God *before one’s own soul*; or *before the ear of the brethren*; or *before the world and the demons*; or lastly, *before the Lord God Himself.*

When the flame of holy joy burns freely in the heart of the saint, altho he be alone or in chains in the dungeon, he feels constrained, for his own satisfaction as it were, with a loud voice to sing a psalm to the praise of God. Thus it was that David sang: “I love the Lord because He hath heard my voice and my supplication.” Different is the Hymn of Praise when, with and for the brethren, the saint sings in their company; for then they sing, “Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound; they, shall walk in the light of Thy countenance”; or directly addressing the people of God: “O ye seed of Abraham, His servant, ye children of Jacob His chosen, He is the Lord our God, His judgments are in all the earth.” And another is the Hymn of Triumph, which the Church sings as it were before the world and the demons; then the saints sing: “Thou art the glory of our strength; and in Thy favor our horn shall be exalted; for the Lord is our defense; the Holy One of Israel is our King.”

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But the Hymn of Praise rises highest when it addresses the Eternal One directly; when the saint thinks not of himself, nor of his brethren, nor of the demons, but of the Lord God alone. This is praise in its most solemn aspect. In the singing of the opening sentences of [Psalm li](#). or [Psalm cxxx](#). the difference is immediately felt:

“After Thy loving-kindness, Lord, have mercy upon me,  
For Thy compassion great blot out all my iniquity”;

or:

“Lord, from the depths to Thee I cried,  
My voice, Lord, do Thou hear;  
Unto my supplication’s voice  
Give an attentive ear.”

Then praying and singing are actually become one. In order to pray aloud, the Church must sing, altho more for the sake of the supplication than of the singing.

## XL.

### Prayer and the Consciousness.

“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.”—*Psalm 1. 15.*

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The *form* of prayer does not affect its character. It may be a mere groaning in thought, or a sigh in which the oppressed soul finds relief; it may consist of a single cry, a flow of words, or an elaborate invocation of the Eternal. It may even turn into speaking or singing. But so long as the soul, in the consciousness that God lives and hears its cry, addresses itself directly to Him as tho it stood in His immediate presence, the character of prayer remains intact. However, discrimination between these various forms of prayer is necessary in order to discover, in the *root* of prayer itself, the work of the Holy Spirit.

The suppliant is you; your ego; neither your body nor your soul, but your *person*. It is true, both body and soul are engaged in prayer, but yet in such a way that your person, your ego, your self, pours out the soul; in the soul becomes conscious of your prayer, and through the body gives it utterance.

This will become clear when we consider the part which the body takes in prayer; for no one will deny that the body has something to do with prayer. Mutual prayer is simply impossible without the aid of the body, for that requires a voice to utter prayer in one, and hearing ears in the others. Moreover, prayer without words rarely satisfies the soul. Mere mental prayer is necessarily imperfect; earnest, fervent prayer constrains us to express it in words. There maybe a depth of prayer that can not be expressed, but then we are conscious of the lack; and the fact that the Holy Spirit prays for us with groans that can not be uttered is to us source of very great comfort.

When the soul is perfectly composed, mere mental meditation may be very sweet and blessed; but no sooner do the waters of the soul heave with broader swell than we feel irresistibly constrained to utter prayer in words; and altho in the solitude of the closet yet the silent prayer becomes an audible and sometimes a loud invocation of the mercies of our God. Even Christ in Gethsemane prayed, not in silent meditation nor in unuttered groans, but with strong words which still seem to sound in our ears.

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And not only in this, but in other ways, the body largely affects our prayer.

There is, in the *first* place, a natural desire to make the whole body partake of it. For this reason we kneel when we humble ourselves before the majesty of God. We close the eyes not to be distracted by the world. We lift up the hands as invoking His grace. The agonized wrestler in prayer prostrates himself on the ground. We uncover the head in token of reverence. In the assembly of the saints the men stand on their feet, as they would if the King of Glory should come in.