

PRAYER

Psalter No. 72 st. 2, 3.

Read Matt. 7: 1-12.

Psalter No. 396 st. 2, 3, 4.

Psalter No. 398 st. 1, 2.

Psalter No. 310 st. 1, 2, 5.

XLV. LORD'S DAY.

"Lord, teach us to pray." That, my beloved hearers was the simple request the disciples of Jesus addressed to their Master.

"Lord, teach us to pray." Would their parents so shamefully have neglected the education of their children that they had not even taught them a little prayer? Did not our parents teach us in our earliest youth to bow our knees, fold our hands and close our eyes and utter a prayer? Which mother and father does not teach their children to pray? And would the disciples have lacked this privilege?

No, the disciples did not lack this, they surely could recite a little prayer.

What then was the occasion that led to this request? Discovery. Through the discovering grace of the Spirit we learn to know ourselves as heartless, self-satisfied and prayerless creatures. Yea, by discovering grace we learn that we can not approach unto God.

As often before, they had just come to their Master as He was praying, they had again seen Him bow down full of anxious cares, and had seen him rise again with an easter mind. They had often seen what an encouraging and heartening power went out from the prayer of this truly righteous Man. Therefore they now humbly ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."

They request the Lord to give them an example or rule after which they should pattern their prayers, and at the same time, to lay the words upon their lips. If we understand it thus, the question is not so simple, but rather gives evidence of the truly childlike character of the disciples.

Moreover, their request was not only for words or an example after which they could pattern their prayers, but that the Lord would teach them to pray just as He had prayed, that is, that they might truly know their needs; and that with these needs, they might be much occupied in the right way and on the right place; that they might strive so to enter into communion with God by faith, that, like their Master, they might be comforted encouraged and strengthened.

Then this prayer of the disciples is exactly the utterance of that which is in our own hearts. Must we not often confess, "For we know not what we should pray for as we ought? And when we

know our wants and needs, then we are not able and know not how to be occupied with them at the right place, that is the throne of grace, and in the right manner, that is to bring our needs with faith and confidence upon the altar Christ Jesus.

Therefore a child of God before he prays must often ask, "Lord, teach me to pray."

Is that also the need of your heart? Then we would say as Peter of old, "It is good for us to be here." For we have now come to that part of the Catechism that deals with the prayer that the Lord gave to His people in answer to the petition, "Lord, teach us to pray."

You will find our text in Matthew 7:7,8. "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

Upon these and other similar expressions of the Bible our Catechetical instruction is based as you will find recorded in the Heidelberg Catechism:

XLV. LORD'S DAY.

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for christians?

A. Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us; and also, because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of him, and are thankful for them.

Q. 117. What are the requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which he will hear?

A. First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested himself in his word, for all things, he hath commanded us to ask of him; secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of his divine majesty; thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that he, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as he has promised us in his word.

Q. 118. What hath God commanded us to ask of him?

A. All things necessary for soul and body; which Christ our Lord has comprised in that prayer he himself has taught us.

Q. 119. What are the words of that prayer?

A. Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Dear Hearers!

Thus in our explanation of the Catechism we have come to the last subject the Instructor discusses, prayer.

First he led us down to the pit of our misery, after that he brought us to the hill of deliverance, and then to the mountains of frankincense of praise and thanksgiving. Would you want the same said with the words of the Catechism? The Instructor, basing his instruction upon the Word of God first taught us how great our sins and miseries are, then how we may be delivered from all our

sins and miseries, and after that, how we shall express our gratitude to God for such deliverance.

We have heard that true gratitude that is well pleasing to God consists in keeping the law and in prayer. The law and prayer are the two parts of gratitude.

The first part we have finished. For about ten weeks we have tarried in the spirit at Mount Sinai. We have meditated on the ten commandments that form the constitution of the Kingdom of heaven. We hope that it was for your instruction and your furtherance, and joy of faith. We may say it was a pleasant pause for us. It could be that for us because we did not stand at the mount of lawgiving laden with the curse as those who must fear God's wrath. That is how we stood there before in our misery. But now we stood there as redeemed by the blood and Spirit of Christ, as children of the better covenant. We beheld the law, not in the hands of Moses but as it was enclosed in and fulfilled by Him Who is the true Ark of the covenant.

Still this last part now to be discussed by the Instructor is not less pleasant. Yea, we would say with the governor of the marriage feast of Cana in Galilee, "Thou hast kept the good wine until now."

It is rich material that still remains to be discussed in the last eight Lord's Days. Therefore we hope and pray that the Lord will grant us, also in the discussion of the Lord's Prayer the Spirit of simplicity, so that we may treat these precious matters in simplicity and according to the mind of the spirit to the glory of God and our edification.

In order that we do not roam upon this wide field, we hope to carefully follow our Instructor. Hence in accordance with the 116th Question and Answer we would show you the necessity of prayer.

In this Answer first prayer is described and secondly the necessity of prayer is proved.

What is praying?

Praying is a religious calling upon the Triune God, or upon the Name of God by which one makes the desire of his heart known and opens it in the Name of Christ the Lord, hoping and trusting that he shall be heard by God Whom He shall also thank for the blessing received.

Prayer is also called speaking to the Lord, calling upon God, lifting one's soul up to the Lord, The Lord Jesus calls it knocking and seeking. James calls it drawing nigh to God.

Paul writes in 1 Tim. 2:1 "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks, be made for all men." Supplications are made for desired good, prayers for deliverance of evil, intercessions are prayers for others, and by giving thanks we praise and glorify God for benefits and blessings enjoyed.

Prayer can be done audibly, but God's Word also speaks of silent prayer such as that of Hannah the mother of Samuel. In church public prayer is offered, so that the church answers "Amen" as with Nehemiah (8:6) and in one's closet private prayer is offered, as the Lord says in Matt: 6:6.

Now the question is, "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" This question does not seem to be worded correctly, for the question asks why prayer is necessary for Christians. By Christians God's children, converted people, are meant here. For those people a complete salvation is ready; those people are heirs of those unequalled treasures; to those people the Lord promises with a thousand promises all they need for body and soul, for time and eternity; to those people God remains faithful, He will not alter what He has spoken. He gives it all to them in his good time, freely and sovereignly. Why then is prayer necessary for them?

The answer must be: the Lord does not need our prayer. He is not worshipped by men's hands, as though He needed anything. We need not move Him, for from eternity He was moved with compassion concerning us. Neither need we tell Him anything, for there is not a word in our tongue, but the Lord knows it all together, and He knows much better than we ourselves do what is good, useful and necessary for us.

That prayer is nevertheless necessary for Christians is evident.

(a) from the command of the Lord (Ps. 50:15) "Call upon Me in the day of trouble" and in Jer. 33:3, "Call unto Me." Then there is also the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1ff) which the Lord spoke to teach us that men ought always to pray and not to faint."

(b) It is also evident from the example of the saints of the old and the new dispensation. Here we have Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Samuel, David, yea, a cloud of witnesses which the Apostle holds before us as examples, (Heb. 12:1) Consider also especially the Lord Jesus; He could say, "I was continually in prayer." Of Him the Apostle writes (Heb. 5:7) "Who in the days of His flesh when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared."

(c) Prayer is also necessary for God's people because it is the chief part of thankfulness, for is not the giving of thanks included in prayer? Therefore prayer is called the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15.) And David calls it incense in Ps. 141, "Let my hands be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. How strange: the greatest beggar at the throne of grace is the best priest at the incense altar of thankfulness. That is why the, "God, I thank Thee" of the Pharisee is a stench in God's nostrils, and the "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" of the publicans is as heavenly music in God's ears.

How very strange, child of God, begging of God is the chief part of thankfulness. And yet you complain that you are not thankful, because you cannot bring yourself to the heights of that happy Christendom.

Still what the Instructor says here is very clear. In prayer our whole heart reaches out to the Lord. I am, of course, not referring to a little form prayer, to that reciting of a prayer, or to the muttering of a few or of many words; that is not praying, nor, therefore is it giving thanks. We refer here to such a prayer as the next question speaks of. In such a prayer then, our heart is devoted to the Lord.

In such a prayer we acknowledge the Lord as the Fountain of all blessings. Thereby we honor Him as being the Gracious One, the Beneficent One, the Mighty One and the Faithful One, Who will and can and shall give us all we need. Yea, in such a prayer we say "Amen" to all God's promises.

By prayer the believer completes his spiritual armor. For after Paul (in Ephesians 6) has shown God's church and God's child their spiritual armor, he, in the same breath, as it were adds, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit." When prayer is lacking, our whole armor is naught.

But there is more. The Lord promises to add His blessing "Ask — and it shall be given you." Hence, if you do not pray, it will not be given you. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee" is His promise. "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee."

The Lord gives His blessings upon our prayers, not because of our prayers. They have no worthiness in themselves. Yet the Lord says, "I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them."

And how often this has been experienced. Where should we start and where should we end if we should enumerate all the examples we find of this in the Bible. But what further need have we of witnesses? Child of God you yourself are a witness that the Lord for Christ's sake hears and answers prayer. How often the Lord has delivered you from illness, from poverty and from distress. Indeed, David is not the only one who can sing, "I love the Lord because He hath heard my voice and my supplications. Because He hath inclined His ear unto me, therefore will I call upon Him as long as I live." (Ps. 116:1,2).

In his answer to the question, "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" the Instructor says, "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them."

My hearers, you must not understand these words as if they mean that the sinner is the first one in the application of grace, that we should begin to pray with sincere desires and to be thankful and that God then gives us His grace and Spirit.

If that were so, nothing would come of it. An unconverted person can not even pray. To pray with sincere desires is grace, it is a pure work of faith for which we need God's grace and the Holy Spirit.

The Instructor then also pre-supposes that the first workings of grace and of the Holy Spirit are present with the patient. You must remember that he is speaking of children of God, hence to such unto whom it was given to believe on Christ. (Phil 1:29). By praying thus one shows himself to be a person in whom God has magnified His grace, he is marked as one to whom the promises of God pertain.

The Instructor wants to teach us the interrelation between God's giving and our prayer. God begins to give, then we begin to pray and then God gives us still more. If, therefore we would enjoy those gifts, we must hold to the order of God:

Earnest desires for them!

Continually ask for them!

Be thankful for them!

Now in accordance with Question and Answer 117 we must consider the requisites of an acceptable prayer.

The question reads: "What are the requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which He will hear?"

This question presupposes that not every prayer is pleasing to God, and not every prayer is heard by Him. And that is very true. Certainly the prayers of the wicked are not pleasing to the Lord, yea they are an abomination to Him. But that is not all, God's people also complain of unanswered prayers, prayers which God has not heeded. And now I know that the Lord has heard many of the prayers of His children unnoticeably, or in a very different manner, or will still answer them in the future, although His children number these among the unanswered prayers. But besides these there are prayers which God does not answer and never will answer. And that can embitter us so that we boldly say the Lord holds Himself as if He were deaf, so that He will not hear us and will not fulfill our needs.

Hear what the man after God's heart says, "My rock, be not Thou deaf unto me; lest if Thou be silent unto me, I become like them that go down into the pit." (Ps. 28:1 Am. Rev.).

And yet, when the Lord does not hear our prayer, we must seek the reason in ourselves. James says it is "because ye ask amiss."

"What then are the requisites of that prayer which is acceptable to God and which he will hear?"

In his answer the Instructor points to three things.

- (a) to the exalted object of prayer
- (b) to the proper attitude of the supplicant
- (c) to the immovable basis of acceptance.

Permit me to elucidate these three matters in accordance to the answer of the Instructor:

(a) We shall then first speak of the exalted object of prayer, hence of Him to Whom the supplicant turns, that is the Triune God. Yea, to Him alone do we pray, not to Mary not to John or Peter, nor to the angels. None of them can hear us, can know our wants nor can they supply our needs. The supplicant should take heed lest he pray to an unknown God as those of Athens did, and lest he worship what he knows not, as the Samaritans did, and lest he do service unto them which by nature are no gods as the heathens do, and lest he bow to wood and stone as the papists do.

Worship God!

He alone is the All-knowing One. He knows our wants and needs, "though Abraham be ignorant of us and Israel acknowledge us not," as God's people say in Isa. 63:16.

He alone is the Omnipresent One, Who is always with us, and can hear and help us everywhere.

He is the Almighty One Who alone can help us.

And He is the Merciful One Who alone is willing to help us.

And He is the All-sufficient One Who out of His never diminishing fulness can fill all our empty treasures with durable riches and righteousness.

The saints also turned to Him.

"Our fathers put their trust in Thee,

Believed, and Thou didst set them free.

They cried and trusting in Thy Name

Were saved and were not put to shame."

Ps. 22

Our fathers refused the honor of being worshipped when men would give them that honor. "Stand up," said Peter, "I myself also am a man." "See thou do it not: I am thy fellow-servant and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus," thus spoke the angel at whose feet John fell to worship. Rev. 19:10.

The true supplicant lifts up his heart and voice to God the Father through God the Son in God the Holy Spirit, Who composes our prayers, yea, makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. God the Holy Spirit prays within us through God the Son to God the Father.

Thus the Word of God teaches us and thus our Catechism answers to the question what is required in a prayer that is acceptable to God: "First that we from the heart pray to the one true God only Who hath manifested Himself in His Word."

"Never serve nor fear

Gods of wood or stone

I am God alone

Worship and adore me."

(b) But now it make a difference in which frame of heart

we approach that Most High Majesty. Let us then show you the proper attitude of the suppliant.

We must pray to God with our whole heart. "From the heart," says the Instructor. And the Lord says by the prophet Jeremiah, "And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for me, with all your heart." It is well, our prayer should rise up out of the depth of our soul. Prayer is mostly an activity of our soul, of our spirit. God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Hence it is no wonder that thousands of those lukewarm, heartless prayers, that do not even merit the name of prayer, are not heard by God. We abhor such heartless muttering, how the Lord Himself must then loathe it.

We should pray to God in deep humility. That humility must be wrought in us by a right and thorough knowledge of our sins. The catechism says, "that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery so that we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty."

Without that humility, without that acknowledging of our sin, without that feeling of our unworthiness, of our unimportance of our having forfeited everything, without bowing low before His majesty, without pleading upon the mediatorial righteousness of the Lord Jesus, we may not expect our prayer to be heard.

The saints of the Old and New Testaments have given us examples. See that bowing low and hear that humble supplication of Abraham, the father of the faithful, as in Gen. 18:23-32 he pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah. And hear also Jacob when at the Jabbok. He wrestles with God (Gen. 32:24-30). And then hear the man after God's heart in Psalm 51 when feeling his guilt and sin before God he creeps in the dust and as a penitent, supplicates for mercy. Is it still necessary to remind you of the tears of Mary Magdalene, and of Peter and of the publican's imploring for mercy?

Such a prayer is pleasing to the Lord because it is wrought by the Holy Ghost.

"The Lord draws nigh to broken hearts,

To contrite spirits help imparts."

Such prayers are called sacrifices of God, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit."

And when our soul is in such a frame, the reverent attitude of the body will not be lacking.

(c) And with this humility we need confidence that He will surely hear and answer our prayer, however defective it may be. That leads us to discuss the immovable basis for acceptance.

In prayer we need humility, but also boldness. The Apostle writes that so clearly to the Hebrews (Ch. 10:19,22) "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, — let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. And James says (Ch. 1:6) that whatever we ask of God

we must ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

For that confidence that God will surely hear our humble prayer, although we have forfeited it a thousand times, we have an immovable basis in the merits of Christ and in His intercession. Without Christ God is a consuming fire; then He smokes against our prayers, and the convinced sinner dares not approach the thrice holy One. But in Him God opened a way to His throne of grace, and in that way He calls to us, "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Thus also God's children of the old dispensation did. They sent up their prayers to God in the Name of the Messiah. They pleaded "for the sake of the Branch that Thou madest strong for Thyself."

God's children of the New Dispensation do likewise. They lay their prayers upon the golden altar of Christ's merits. "By Him, says the Apostle (Rom. 5:2) we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

Child of grace, it is here as at the court of Pharaoh, "Ye shall not see my face, except Benjamin be with you," said Joseph, and so says the Lord also.

Another basis is God's promises.

The Lord says repeatedly that He will hear His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him.

But what we pray for is also important. See the 118th Question and Answer: "What has God commanded us to ask of Him? the Catechism asks. And the answer, founded upon God's Word, says: "All things necessary for soul and body; which Christ our Lord has comprised in that prayer He Himself has taught us."

As you heard in the answer, the things for which we may pray are limited.

We may ask for necessities, hence, not for all that which we would like in order to feed our pride, nor for all that which we think we need. But we may ask for that which we really need.

But then too, for all we need, both for body and soul, for time, for passing out of time, and for eternity may we ask, and also for ourselves personally, for our home, for our church, for the Church of God over the whole earth, for our city, for our country and our nation, for our rulers, and for all those in authority, etc.

My hearers, we may also pray for spiritual needs.

Hence, we may ask for conversion, both for a first renewing and for daily conversion. We may ask the dear Lord whether for the sake of Christ His Son He will graciously forgive all our sins. We may ask for grace and power to strive against the corruption of our wicked heart, against the temptations of the world, and against the wiles and the terrors of Satan.

We may ask God to sanctify the punishment of our iniquities here and to remove them from us hereafter.

We may implore the Lord for grace so that love may burn more and more in our hearts, and that as Paul prayed (Eph. 3) we may be rooted and grounded in love; that our faith may be strengthened and our hope may be revived.

Yea, we may pray for all that we need to know and love, and praise and live unto the Lord and His Christ, yea, in a word, for all we need for life and godliness.

But we may not pray to be that adored Christian or that highly praised preacher; we may, however ask the Lord to use us in His service.

And we may also pray that in ourselves we may be the chief of sinners and the least of the saints. But then you must be truly sincere! When the Lord grants you His discovering and impoverishing and emptying and nullifying grace so that nothing is left of you but a big zero, you may not become irritable!

We may also ask for all things necessary for the body, hence for food and shelter as Agur did (Prov. 30) and for strength and health, for preservation and blessings, etc.

Yea, we may ask God for all that the Lord Christ has instructed us to ask for in the prayer He Himself has taught us.

We hope on the next Lord's Day to speak about that most perfect prayer, which the Catechism records in the 119th Answer.

Before we close with a word of application, let us sing Psalter No. 398 st. 12. 1+2

Dear hearers!

Thus we have spoken about prayer in general: why it is necessary for Christians, what the attitude of the suppliant must be and what we may pray for.

Allow me to ask you a question now: Do you make use of this gracious permission of a condescending God, Who permits us to approach Him and to ask of Him all we need for body and soul? Have you ever considered how much goodness of God is revealed thereby? The Papists and the Jews and the nominal Christians must pray, but we confess that we may pray.

And yet there are thousands and their number increases daily who never use that gracious permission, who never pray. Oh, how dreadful will the outcome be at their death and in judgment!

May a wicked person pray? Of Simon the Sorcerer Peter says that he was in the bond of iniquity, and still he admonishes him to pray for forgiveness and conversion.

How many there are who pray when they are in distress, but when the distress is over, the praying is finished. The Lord says, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and *thou shalt glorify Me*." If that last part is neglected, God will not hear you the next time you call upon Him in distress.

How many pray to an unknown God, to a God of their own fancy. We must pray to Him Who has revealed Himself in His Word, otherwise we may not expect to be heard.

There are those that say, "I cannot pray." Do then as the disciples did, they asked the Lord to teach them. Begin with that!

Others say, "I have prayed so long already, but God has never heard me." And the Lord says "Before they call, I will answer." And has He not heard you? That is strange indeed! But for what have you prayed then? Have you prayed perhaps only for material gifts, or perhaps only for the gifts and not for the Giver? He who does not want the giver will not receive His gifts. And he who does not want spiritual gifts will not receive material gifts, either, at least not in God's favor. Him who prays for forgiveness of his guilt, but not for deliverance from sin, God does not hear.

To pray as a Christian you must be a Christian. To be a Christian you must be regenerated. May you learn to pray for that. What a privilege it is that we may pray!

Dear child of God, is prayer not for your spiritual life what oxygen is for your natural life? Have you not experienced that prayer is as the key that unlocks the cabinet, and as the bucket with which you draw the water of life? Is it not the hand with which you pick the fruit from the Tree of Life? Yea, is it not the cord with which you bind the Lord Jesus?

Truly it is a rich grace that we may pray!

But it is shameful that we do it so little. How often then must we pray? There is no rule for that, but he who lives closest to the Lord will have the richest life. Therefore I would say, "Pray without ceasing."

It is a pity we do it so defectively. We so often knock at the wrong door. How cold and lukewarm our prayers at our meals are. How dead are the words we use, what a vain repetition of words, as if God were not the All-knowing One, as if we had to instruct God. Often we pray with irreverence and call it liberty.

Oh, Lord, forgive the sin of our prayers!

May God's dear Spirit constantly kindle prayer within us. Pray then for it. Give God liberty in answering your prayers.

Remember that a cross borne prayerfully is not heavy, and a conflict prayerfully fought is not lost. A prayerful life gives a thankful death. Those that have learned to sow with tears shall one day reap with rejoicing. Those who have learned to pray here as a beggar, shall one day eternally offer thanks as a priest of the Lord, and that all for Christ's sake.

Amen.