

# Chapter 4

## Parts of Prayer No. 1 September 22, 1996

Prayer: its centrality as supreme mode of faith and its difficulty; its definition as “earnest and familiar talking with God”; and, last week, its effect and power as a divinely appointed instrumentality that changes things in the world, even the world whose history God controls and determined ahead of time down to the minutest detail.

Now, we move on to consider what we will call for want of something better, “the parts of prayer.” By this I mean the various things that prayer includes, the subjects that, according to the Scripture, ought to fill up our earnest and familiar talking with God. We are familiar with the famous definition of our Shorter Catechism:

“Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.”

There are three parts in that definition: petition (offering of desires), confession, and thanksgiving, with two prerequisites as to form which apply equally to the three parts: in the name of Christ and according to his will.

In the popular acrostic ACTS we have four parts (with no formal characteristics): adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. That acrostic requires us to distinguish between adoration and thanksgiving, though such a distinction is somewhat contrived. Thanking God for his perfections and

for his wonderful works and adoring God for the same can, perhaps, be distinguished but it is a distinction with letter difference or importance.

Isaac Watts tried to state all the parts of prayer with some of its formal requirements — what he thought of as “the elements” of prayer — in a single 4 line verse:

Call upon God, adore and confess,  
Petition, plead, and then declare  
You are the Lord’s; Give thanks and bless  
And let “Amen” confirm the prayer.

Depending upon how one organizes all the teaching of the Bible concerning prayer, the list of its “parts” will be longer or shorter. I want us to consider, at least these three: Adoration/Thanksgiving; Confession of Sin; and Petition. Perhaps I will add another as I consider those three on the coming Lord’s Day evenings, but, for now, we will take these three as surely the main parts of prayer in the biblical teaching about prayer and as the main business of the prayers that are recorded for us in the Bible.

So, we begin with ADORATION AND THANKSGIVING. We begin with a good example of a prayer that is nothing but adoration, Psalm 93.

Read: Psalm 93

According to Dr. Packer, this psalm is reputed to have been Calvin’s favorite psalm! It is a joyful acknowledgement of the sovereignty, the majesty, and the omnipotence of God — his supremacy over all other powers — and the privilege of the church to be related to such a God.

Now, such praises and adoration as this psalm contains is by no means unique in the psalter. There are many psalms devoted to such praise (Psalms 103 and 145 chief among them) and most psalms have some of it whatever may be the primary theme of psalm. There are some 40 psalms that are typically classified as psalms of praise; indeed, one of the names of the Psalter is Tehillim, “Praises.”

It is the glory of our faith that we have a God who is “worthy to be praised” (96:4). The heathen really have very little for which to praise their deities, but we have more to praise him for than we will ever have time or power to recount.

What is more, this is a power that can be cultivated. Every Christian should be praising God more and more, the more he learns of God's nature and his works, the more he looks to see God's hand in the world and his or her own life, the more he discovers of God's faithfulness as he puts God's promises and presence to the test, etc. In Psalm 93, the majesty and power of the sea is turned into the adoration of the God who made the seas and who gave them their bounds. In Psalm 104 we learn in still other ways to turn our observation of the created world to the adoration of God. In Carl Henry's autobiography, Confessions of a Theologian, Dr. Henry describes his signing up for a botany class at Wheaton College in the mid-1930s.

“When I became a Christian something remarkable happened to the world of flora and fauna. Lupines, lady's-slippers, cornflowers, daisies, violets and other wildflowers and ferns that populated the woods near our Long Island home revealed in intricate and lucent beauty what I had missed until I recognized nature as the Creator's gift and handiwork.” [pp. 82-83]

I am now reading a remarkable book by a biochemist at Lehigh University, Michael Behe. The book is Darwin's Black Box and the subtitle describes the argument: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution. It is full of the most wonderful, amazing, really stupefying demonstrations of the complexity of life at its lowest, simplest, form. He describes these biochemical machines of almost limitless complexity that one encounters in the interior of every cell and that serve the thousands upon thousands of functions that are critical to life. His argument is that in all of these machines — functioning groups of proteins that work together in systems of dizzying complexity to perform every function from clotting blood, to determining the shape of a cell to interpreting the light that strikes the retina of an eye, are all characterized by a feature he calls “irreducible complexity.” That is, nothing works unless everything works. No function is provided without everything present and working at once. But, the systems are so complex that the theory of evolution, so Behe argues, simply cannot provide a plausible explanation of how such complex bio-chemical machines — and life requires thousands upon thousands of them — could have evolved step by step. The machine is worthless, worse than worthless, until it is entirely together and functioning. In his conclusion Behe writes:

“Now it’s the turn of the fundamental science of life, modern biochemistry, to disturb. The simplicity that was once expected to be the foundation of life has proven to be a phantom; instead, systems of horrendous, irreducible complexity inhabit the cell. The resulting realization that life was designed by an intelligence is a shock to us in the twentieth century who have gotten used to thinking of life as the result of simple natural laws. But other centuries have had their shocks, and there is no reason to suppose that we should escape them.” [pp. 252-253]

But, and this is my point, the marvelous biochemical world of unbelievable sophistication and complexity has another purpose besides apologetics and the defense of the faith against modern naturalism. It is also a doxological matter. One reads Behe’s book and a Christian simply cannot help but think what a genius God is. You sit back in abject amazement at the mind who conceived all of this and created it. It further opens to your view what measureless complexity there must as well be in the providence of God so far as it concerns the lives of human beings. How much there must be that we cannot see, cannot begin to understand or measure or calculate in our own experience, in our own lives. But God has it all in his hands! The psalmists took the world they knew and turned it into pure adoration. We are to do the same and it becomes easier and easier. Calvin wanted all Christians to be astronomers. What would he think of biochemistry! Thank God for modern science and what it shows us of the indescribable majesty of God!

If, as we believe, the Psalter is a manual of prayer and has been given us to teach us both how and what to pray, then we carry away from the Psalter and its teaching on prayer that adoration/thanksgiving, the celebration of God for his personal excellencies and his mighty and wonderful works of creation and redemption, of providence, of mercy and of judgment, should have a central place in our prayer, that we should often be speaking to God of his glory in our hearts and our eyes.

But this, of course, raises a question. Why does God teach us to praise him? Is he vain? We certainly do not admire a man who wishes always to be praised or who commands others to praise and thank him. Now, in God’s case, of course, he is worth of our praise, entirely and everlastingly worthy of all the praise that we and the entire creation could ever give him. And, we want to praise him because we love him. All of that is clear. But, the

question is why should he teach us to praise him, to adore him in our prayers to him?

Here is C.S. Lewis in a terrific passage putting this question as sharply as it can be put [Reflections on the Psalms, pp. 91-93].

It is a lengthy section, but I want you to hear it in full.

When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for some time after it had been given to me, I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should “praise” God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and of His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind. The Psalms were especially troublesome in this way — “Praise the Lord,” “O praise the Lord with me,” “Praise Him.” (And why, incidentally, did praising God so often consist in telling other people to praise Him? Even in telling whales, snowstorms, etc., to go on doing what they would certainly do whether we told them or not?) Worse still was the statement put into God’s own mouth, “whoso offereth me thanks and praise, he honoureth me” (50:23). It was hideously like saying, “What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.” Worst of all was the suggestion of the very silliest Pagan bargaining, that of the savage who makes offerings to his idol when the fishing is good and beats it when he has caught nothing. More than once the Psalmists seemed to be saying, “You like praise. Do this for me, and you shall have some.” Thus in 54 the poet begins “save me” (1), and in verse 6 adds an inducement, “An offering of a free heart will I give thee, and praise thy Name.” Again and again the speaker asks to be saved from death on the ground that if God lets His suppliants die He will get no more praise from them, for ghosts in Sheol cannot praise (30:10, 88:10, 119:175) And mere quantity of praise seemed to count; “seven times a day do I praise thee” (119:164). It was extremely distressing. It made one think what

one least wanted to think. Gratitude to God, reverence to Him, obedience to Him, I thought I could understand; not this perpetual eulogy. Nor were matters mended by a modern author who talked of God's "right" to be praised. [pp 90-91]

But now the answer to this great question comes and we really see the goodness, the rightness, the health, and the love, and gratitude that there is in our praises and that could not be were it not in our praises.

But the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game — praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. The good critics found something to praise in many imperfect works; the bad ones continually narrowed the list of books we might be allowed to read. The healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all. Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. Nor does it cease to be so when, through lack of skill, the forms of its expression are very uncouth or even ridiculous. Heaven knows, many poems of praise addressed to an earthly beloved are as bad as our bad hymns, and an anthology of love poems for public and perpetual use would probably be as sore a trial to literary taste as Hymns Ancient and Modern. I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help

doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with (the perfect hearer died a year ago). This is so even when our expressions are inadequate, as of course they usually are. But how if one could really and fully praise even such things to perfection — utterly “get out” in poetry or music or paint the upsurge of appreciation which almost bursts you? Then indeed the object would be fully appreciated and our delight would have attained perfect development. The worthier the object, the more intense this delight would be. If it were possible for a created soul fully (I mean, up to the full measure conceivable in a finite being) to “appreciate”, that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beauty. It is along these lines that I find it easiest to understand the Christian doctrine that “Heaven” is a state in which angels now, and men hereafter, are perpetually employed in praising God. This does not mean, as it can so dismally suggest, that it is like “being in Church”. For our “service” both in their conduct and in our power to participate, are merely attempts at worship; never fully successful, often 99.9 per cent failures, sometimes total failures. We are not riders but pupils in the riding school; for most of us the falls and bruises, the aching muscles and the severity of the exercise, far outweigh those few moments in which we were, to our own astonishment, actually galloping without terror and without disaster. To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God — drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”. But we shall then know that

these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.

Meanwhile of course we are merely, as Donne says, tuning our instruments. The tuning up of the orchestra can be itself delightful, but only to those who can in some measure, however little anticipate the symphony. The Jewish sacrifices, and even our own most sacred rites, as they actually occur in human experience, are, like the tuning, promise, not performance. Hence, like the tuning, they may have in them much duty and little delight; or none. But the duty exists for the delight. When we carry out our “religious duties” we are like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready. I mean, for the most part. There are happy moments, even now, when a trickle creeps along the dry beds; and happy souls to whom this happens often. [pp. 93-97].

Now, there is an application, many applications in all of that pure wisdom. But I leave you with this one. When we are in this house together on the Lord’s Day, we do a great deal of this praising God. Much of it is in the singing of hymns. But, if these hymns are not themselves real prayers, then they are not praises at all. We tend to think of singing as one thing and praying as another. But singing is very often in worship just a means of adding glory to a prayer, for that is what music does, it adds glory to words.

We had a complaint some years ago about our “congregational petitions,” what then was called “congregational prayers,” that service of prayer that is part of our Sabbath morning liturgy. The complaint was that there was little or no praise and confession in those prayers, only petition. True prayer, we were told, should have all of those elements in it. But, we replied, we have already been at prayer; indeed, from the beginning of our service we have been at prayer and at nothing else. Almost the entire service is a prayer, a speaking to God (there are parts that are God’s speaking to us, of course). But the one making the complaint did not think of our hymn of praise as prayer or our confession of sin as prayer because it didn’t have what he associated with the appearance of prayer. Brothers and sisters, do you see, do you appreciate, how much more prayer there will be in your life every week, if every time you lift up your voice with the church in a hymn to God you are truly and wholly at prayer and if every time you kneel to say the confession with the congregation you are truly speaking to God in that earnest and familiar way that is true prayer? This praising is prayer and we

must be sure that it is always prayer for us and for all of us together. That is why I so often remind you and will continue to remind you as we begin to sing our praises to God to speak them directly to God and not merely sing them to the air.

Prayers and praises go in pairs;  
They have praises who have prayers.

This means our hymns of praise in the service are prayers, as in the Book of Common prayer; the problem with petitions (Marty P.).