

The Holy Spirit and Prayer

In the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples there is the phrase, "Your will be done on earth as in heaven." It is all too easy to pass over the implication of that statement without appreciating its significance. Because we believe that God is Almighty we tend to assume that he will ensure that his will is done anyway. However, as we saw in considering the background to the operation of the gifts of the Spirit, God has given to humankind the dominion or lordship over the earth and everything that is in it.

God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed." (Genesis 1:28-29)

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

We have already seen that it was God's intention that he would rule the earth through humankind who were to understand God's will through the Holy Spirit revealing it to our spirit, delighting and deciding to obey it in our soul and putting it into effect by using our body. However, God gave man free-will and that involved the possibility of man rejecting God and choosing to go his own way. That possibility became fact; but, in spite of our failure, God did not change his plan; he still waits for man to choose to say 'yes' to his will. For that plan to become realised he sent his Son, but not as some powerful force imposing his will on mankind, but himself becoming man. The plan was not changed, Jesus became flesh; the will of God was perfectly expressed and

effected *through a man*, in accordance with God's original purpose. Paul refers to Jesus as another Adam:-

"The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. (1 Corinthians 15:45)

In its context Paul is contrasting the spiritual body of the resurrected Christ with the natural body of the first Adam. Nevertheless, there is the clear implication that Jesus came to be what Adam failed to be on earth - the perfect man. The implication of the whole of scripture is consistent. God works on earth with the co-operation of man. The humility of such an almighty God is incredible; he waits for man to desire his will before he acts on earth. That is why Christ teaches his disciples to pray to the Father to perform his will on earth.

If this is so, how can we be sure that God's will will ever be done on earth? There are many prophecies in scripture awaiting fulfilment and if it depends upon man desiring and then asking God to bring them to pass, perhaps they will never happen and therefore Scripture will prove to be false because it states that we can rely on God's promises. There is a fascinating passage in Ezekiel Chapter 36. The prophet is speaking at a time when the land of Israel is occupied by their enemies and the majority of God's people are in exile. He speaks words of comfort, saying that the people will soon come home and the towns will be rebuilt and inhabited. God will increase the numbers of both men and animals, more than they were before. He takes 36 verses to give that prophecy of hope but then he adds this:-

Thus says the Lord God: "I will also let the house of Israel inquire of Me to do this for them: I will increase their men like a flock. Like a flock offered as holy sacrifices, like the flock at Jerusalem on its feast days, so shall the ruined cities be filled

with flocks of men. Then they shall know that I am the Lord."
(Ezekiel 36:37-38)

Through the prophet God reveals to the people what his will is; then he says that he will let them inquire of him, or ask him, to do it. God's will will be done; he has not and will not leave himself without a witness on earth. Elijah feared that he was the only prophet left who was faithful to God:

And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." (1 Kings 19:14)

But God told him that he had already chosen Elisha to succeed him and:-

"Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:18)

God's will and purpose will be done on earth, his promises may be trusted, but he relies on his people on earth praying that will and purpose into reality. Oh, the responsibility we have, we who know him, to cry to him to bring his plan and purpose into effect. No one else can pray that - the world does not know him.

If, as Christ taught us, we are to pray that the Father's will shall be done on earth as it is done in heaven, it is obviously important that we should know what that will is. We have seen from that quotation from Ezekiel that God revealed his plan through his prophet so that the people could pray for it meaningfully. Once again we are brought back to the text which we have quoted so many times in various contexts:-

"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-15)

In the past the Holy Spirit came upon only certain chosen prophets and they revealed what they had received from God to the people. Now, however, we live in the times foretold by Joel:-

And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28-29)

Because the Spirit has been poured out on all believers we are all able to discover God's will. It may not be that we are all to have the office of prophet, able to understand God's plan for nations, but we are to know God's will for us as individuals and that part of his body, the Church, for which he has called us to be responsible. This is what Paul is getting at when he says:-

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints-- (Ephesians 6:18)

All prayer is to be in the Spirit (capital 'S', i.e. the Holy Spirit). We are to be guided and directed by the Holy Spirit so that it is God's will and not our own that we are praying shall be done.

However, there are some things that we just cannot know. It isn't that the Spirit is ignorant of them but they are beyond our ability to understand. The great prophets of the Old Testament saw

only part of God's purposes. Some of their prophecies were fulfilled immediately, in their own times. However, very often they spoke of things they could not fully understand. Isaiah spoke of a suffering servant yet to come; but he could not foresee that that would be God himself. So with us; very often as we look out on a world which seeks to live out its life in ignorance of the God who gave life to all things, we will yearn for his will to be recognised and done. But the problems are so great, and the way God will work so unusual, that our conscious minds could not grasp what he plans to do. The yearning may be so intense that we actually groan or sigh but we cannot put our feelings into words. The wonderful thing is that God, who works on earth through mankind, can take those unspoken yearnings and interpret them in the way he desires as prayers calling upon him to act on earth:-

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. (Romans 8:26)

The Holy Spirit will pray on our behalf and from within us, even though we may not understand what God's will is in that particular situation. We have seen already that the Spirit searches the deep things of God and reveals them to us (1 Cor. 2:11). Paul goes on to say that this works, as it were, in reverse:-

Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:27)

Here it is God the Father who, knowing us through and through, accepts the Holy Spirit praying within us the expression of our own prayer. So, God does not violate his principle of working on earth only with the co-operation of mankind, yet our prayer is

the perfect expression of his will for it is the Holy Spirit, who understands that will, praying within us.

Incidentally, this truth that God the Father knows us through and through, is a necessary corrective to any idea we may have that the Father is remote and it is only the Holy Spirit who interprets him to us. We have already seen that God is so totally 'other' from us that our minds cannot conceive who he is in reality. I believe that I am right in the illustration I gave of God always expressing himself in such a varied and extensive manner that for us to understand anything at all of him and his will, it is necessary for the Holy Spirit to select certain specific parts of that expression and reveal them to us. However, that illustration needs to be balanced by the truth that we have an intimate relationship with the Father.

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (Romans 8:14-16)

Jesus came to bring us into relationship with his Father and the Spirit confirms the work of Christ. When we are born again we are brought into that relationship which exists between a Father and his child. We sense that within our human spirit and it is confirmed to us by the Holy Spirit, so that we can use that most intimate word by which to this day a Jewish child will call his father - 'Abba'. It is like our word 'Daddy'.

To return to our theme; all our prayer is to be "*in* the Spirit." However, as we saw when we were considering some of the gifts of the Spirit, Paul also speaks of praying "*with* the spirit" (small 's'). Do not confuse the two. All prayer should be in the Holy

Spirit, some of our prayer may be with our own spirit. From its context Paul is obviously referring to praying in tongues:-

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. (1 Corinthians 14:14-15)

There is no mystery about Paul's meaning here. He is simply saying that sometimes he will praise or give thanks to God, speaking or singing in tongues. In which case he will not know what he is actually saying (unless he has the gift of interpretation); his spirit is expressing itself in joy and freedom, by-passing his understanding. However, he will also pray or sing with his mind, consciously working out what he intends to express.

I am very conscious of the fact that having stated time and again that Scripture shows that we need not only to be born again of the Spirit but also to be filled with Spirit, I have not said anything about how this happens. Like salvation, it is received by faith in response to our asking. It is interesting that St. Luke links it to the request of the disciples that Jesus should teach them to pray. First he gives them what has become known as 'The Lord's Prayer'. Then he goes on to encourage them to persevere in prayer by telling them the story of the friend at midnight who asks for bread, and saying that he who asks receives. He ends with this:-

"If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:11-13)

Being filled with the Spirit, like salvation, is something that is very personal. Forgive me therefore if I explain my personal experience. Some years after my wife and I had accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, our Vicar spoke at a midweek prayer fellowship about the fact that there was 'more yet', and quoted this passage in St. Luke's Gospel. Then he said, "Have you who already know Christ, asked to be filled with the Holy Spirit?" He said no more and frankly I do not think he had experienced anything of the so-called charismatic gifts. Within the Anglican Church in those days, very few people had. Very probably he was one of those who had been taught and believed that the gifts were not for today. When we got home that night my wife and I knelt down and asked to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We did not fall over, nor speak in tongues, nor did we see visions or prophesy. We knew nothing of such things and had no one to explain them to us. However, we both found that our breathing changed and we were taking long deep breaths. Only then did we recall that when Jesus said to his disciples, "Receive Holy Spirit" (John 20:22), he breathed on them; indeed, the translation could be, "Receive Holy Breath"; perhaps there was a link with the change in our breathing. That encouraged us greatly. We knew something had happened to us but we were not sure what. That was in 1959.

I was due to be made a priest in 1964 and went off to the three day retreat immediately beforehand. My birthday fell in that period and my wife gave me a copy of "The Cross and The Switchblade" for my present (having read it herself first!). It is about the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of young gang leaders in the States, and it refers to the gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in tongues. I read it on the retreat and, recalling that when the Bishop laid hands on me in the ordination service on the Sunday he would say, "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God" (The

wording in the Book of Common Prayer), I thought that this would be a good time for me to receive the filling of the Spirit. So I prayed that whatever the Bishop thought he was doing, God would fill me in a new way with his Spirit. I don't know what I thought would happen but I was full of expectation. When he laid his hands on me once again I found myself breathing differently with those long deep breaths. When I returned home and all the friends and relatives had left and the children were in bed, my wife said, "I can speak in tongues". It was really rather amusing. I was the one who had been trained, I was the one on whom the Bishop had laid hands, yet she was the one who spoke in tongues. It was all the goodness of the Lord, who was assuring her that she was not left out or second class. A few days later I found I was able to speak in tongues also.

So it isn't necessary for hands to be laid upon us, or for someone else to pray for us, in order to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit. It is simply a matter of asking and then believing that God has answered our prayer on the strength of Christ's promise, "How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." Nevertheless, we must be careful that we are not too proud to ask for prayer. As the faith began to spread from Jerusalem, some in Samaria believed. The apostles heard about it and sent Peter and John, presumably to investigate and to encourage. They found that although the Samaritans had accepted the Word of God about Christ, the Holy Spirit had not fallen on any of them.

Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.
(Acts 8:17)

Similarly, Timothy had obviously been greatly blessed when Paul prayed for him:-

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6)

We Christians do not pray enough for each other. Paul and the writer to the Hebrews requested prayer for themselves (1 Thes.5:25, 2 Thes.3:1, Heb. 13:18). Presumably the recipients of the letters would have to pray from a distance, but we ought also to minister to each other when we meet together. James certainly advocates this:-

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

And it is not simply the elders who are to do this:-

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:16)

Are we too proud to ask others to pray for us? and are we too shy to do it when others do ask? I believe that the Church will be immeasurably strengthened when it is a normal practice for members of a fellowship to minister to each other in prayer in the Holy Spirit when they meet together.