

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer

5. "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven"

Greg Palmer

IMPLICIT IN THIS request is the understanding that God's ways are not ours, nor is His will ours. Even our Lord Jesus Christ acknowledged that the desires of mortal man that he possessed were not God's: "nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done" (Lk. 22:42; cf. Jno. 5:30; 6:38). There is significant humility in these words, and complete surrender. How can the proud and self-reliant man claim to desire that God's will be done when his life is spent in promoting his own?

There is also the acceptance that God's will is right, whatever it may be. Our Lord did not say, "Thy will be done as long as I agree with it", nor did he say, "Thy will be changed to suit me". Our endorsement or otherwise of God's plans is not necessary, God is not accountable to us. The Almighty has no need even to explain Himself to us. Whether we agree with or understand God's ways makes no difference at all to Him. God's way is right, and He will act in a right fashion always. Since we are so far removed from God, and our thoughts and actions so different (Isa. 55:6-9), it is a great leap of faith unconditionally to surrender our will and declare, "Thy will be done".

Clearly the intention of the phrase is worldwide. The request is made to speed the time when God's purpose with the earth is realised and "all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD" (Num. 14:21). This request connects with the previous one, "Thy kingdom come". The extent of the request is explained by the additional phrase, "as in heaven". There is nothing and nowhere in heaven that is not subject to the will of God. There is no disharmony, no strife, no war, pride or bigotry. If there were, then the value of the request would be reduced dramatically.

There is thus no place for the once popular notion of a war in heaven resulting in the devil and his angels being cast out because they are at continual variance with God. This has resulted from an incorrect literal interpretation of certain passages in Revelation that were never intended to be understood in any other fashion than symbolic. If the 'war in heaven between God and the devil' theory is right then we would have expected

Jesus to say, "Thy will be done in earth better than it is done in heaven". Consider these words: "The LORD hath prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all. Bless the LORD, ye His angels, that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word. Bless ye the LORD, all ye His hosts; ye ministers of His, that do His pleasure" (Ps. 103:19-21). There is no place at all for the clumsy notion of celestial battles or eternal conflict. Rather we are directed to consider the peace and harmony, the beauty and order, which submission to the will of God in heaven has produced, and to long for that to happen here on earth also.

Usually we take these words as a prayer that the earth might be filled with the will of God—which they are—but unless we have surrendered ourselves to His will we have no business to ask for the rest of the world to do the same. There is another sense in which we can take the words "in earth". It has been suggested that this rendering (rather than "on earth") was from William Tyndale (and before that, Wycliffe), who desired to convey the idea that "earth" means "human flesh" here. In the sense that Adam was "of the earth, earthy" (1 Cor. 15:47), so are we. Jesus could well have been intending, "Thy will be done in us".

This then becomes a very personal request. We are in effect asking for God to extend our personal submission to His will and make it global. This can be a very difficult thing, for though in our mind we are endeavouring to live as new creatures, yet we have a body of earth.

As before, the request is not a purely selfish one, though we will certainly benefit from its realisation. Properly, the request is made for God, that He might take pleasure in the things that He has made. This is the substance of the declaration in Revelation 4:11, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created". So then, we ask that God's will might be done in ourselves and throughout the earth because we love God and long to see His purpose fulfilled, knowing the joy it will give Him.