

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Obedience and Fear

I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, Which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble. I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats. Selah. Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul. I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me: But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me. (Psalm 66:13-20)

Commentators differ in their assessment of the background of this psalm. Some attribute it to a specific occasion in which God particularly smiled in blessings on the land. Others attribute it to the season of the year when God sent rain at the precise time to benefit the newly sown seed, a great assurance of a good harvest to come. Regardless of the occasion, it is a psalm of thanksgiving for great blessings. It emphasizes God's "godhood." Accordingly, the psalm calls on His people to worship Him both collectively and individually. The first twelve verses indicate a collective worship and faithfulness. The pronouns are plural. Beginning with verse 13, our study text shifts to the singular pronoun "I". Apart from regular collective worship, individual worship seldom occurs. The lone Christian is similar to a lone soldier facing an opposing army. He doesn't stand a chance of victory alone.

Throughout our study of the fear of God I have emphasized that our true attitude of fear toward God will appear in our conduct. Obedience manifests that we fear God. Sin in any form, either acts committed or godly acts omitted, manifests that we do not fear God. That point appears clearly in this passage. David invites those who fear God to witness his vows and sacrifices. He wants to share with God-fearers the blessings that God has bestowed upon him. Why does David specifically single out those who fear God to be his audience? I believe that he understands the quality of fearing God. He knows that they have a compatible experience with his own in terms of God's blessings and in terms of their submissive obedience to God. Not only will they be a good audience to his praise, but they will also resonate to David with their own praise. As the angels sing their rounds of "Holy," "Holy," "Holy" in Isaiah 6:3, so God

fearing people who gather in collective worship "sing the same song" of praise to God and submissive obedience to His Word.

David teaches us a double lesson regarding prayer. On the negative side he asserts that regarding iniquity in his heart, embracing it with pleasure instead of rejecting it, will defeat his prayers. God will not hear his prayer. He will not respond to it or answer it. But then David declares that God has heard his prayer and "attended" to his petitions. The idea of this word is that God has attentively heard and responded to David's prayers. Few things are as encouraging to a struggling saint as the surprising discovery of answered prayer. You face complex problems that seem to defy resolution. You struggle to find answers, but none appear. You take the problem to God in prayer. You continue to hold it up to God in prayer. Perhaps in the darkest moment of frustration and struggle, by amazing surprise, the problem dissolves before your eyes. Those who do not fear God will suggest that the solution was merely a matter of coincidence or will tell you that your mind finally worked out the solution at the subconscious level. But those who fear God will join you in celebrating God's merciful response to your prayers in the solution of your dilemma. Ah, here lies the reason that David seeks out those who fear God to hear the good news of answered prayer and unmerited blessings.

David associates refusal of iniquity with answered prayer, but he does not attribute answered prayer to his personal merit. He distinctly assigns the blessing to divine mercy. James makes a similar association between sin in our life and unanswered prayer. "Ye...fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts" (James 4:2-3).

Whether we consider nations or individuals, fallen people seem programmed to fight to get their way and make their own case for their personal “manifest destiny,” something of their divine right to personal gratification. Several years ago a minister friend told me of a conversation he had with a woman who professed faith in Christ, but was in the midst of divorcing her husband of many years. He was a good provider who had been faithful to her throughout their marriage—her own confession. However, she no longer felt the thrill of excitement in their relationship. She was simply bored with the marriage and wanted out. She said to my friend, “God wants me to be happy, and I can’t be happy in this marriage.” Somewhere along the way she forgot that God “hates divorce,” and that preeminently God wants His children to be holy. True “happiness” grows out of a holy life, not out of a narcissistic appetite for personal pleasure.

Fight as nations or work individually to manipulate people to do what you want them to do, the person who works to get his/her way by devious methods will eventually fail. James takes us to the next step. The person who fights to get his/her way seldom considers the need to take matters to God in prayer and to submit to God. They never even ask God for His aide in the matter. Failure to ask predicts failure to receive.

The next step in self-indulgent pursuit desperately—almost as a last-ditch effort—goes to God with the request. However, God knows the motives of the heart. A prayer to God for self-serving reasons will not be answered. God grants answers to prayers that are offered for His glory and for the greater benefit of others, not for selfish reasons. If we ask God to answer our prayer, however good the petition might appear to our family or friends, He knows the motive of the request. If we desire the answer for selfish reasons, He will deny the request.

I find it fascinating that, from the Puritans to contemporary Christian “pollsters,” Christians who keep records of prayer requests and answers received testify that approximately two thirds of all prayers are answered by a merciful God. We could quite easily explain the other third of our requests under James’ rebuke as self-indulgent issues that are not in our own interest or to the honor of God.

Both David in this psalm and James in his teaching urge us to consider that our obedience, our willing and joyful obedience, to God predicts whether our prayers will be answered or denied.

We noticed earlier in this study that “fear” is associated with Jesus’ own prayers (Hebrews 5:7). Obviously Jesus had no dread of the Father. He didn’t pray with a conscience convicted of sin and fearful of divine judgment. Fearing God in the Biblical sense actually becomes a key attitude of godly worship, unique to prayers that worship God. We are all too often inclined to decide on our own basis what we want, what we will do or not do, long before we take matters to God in prayer. Decide first and then negotiate with God for blessing seems far more the habit of many who profess faith in Christ than the Biblical model that makes prayer the first step in the decision-making process. Such prayers typically fall under the category of unanswered prayers described by James than answered prayers such as we see in this psalm.

When we consider this question of prayer, we often hang up at the simple question. What should we take to God in prayer? If our minds are immersed in Scripture and refined by its teachings, we may take anything that concerns us to God. Prayer should seek God’s blessing and guidance, not appear as an after-thought that seeks to negotiate blessings on our preconceived decisions. If we occasionally pray for the wrong thing, God assures us in Scripture that He will correct our hearts and requests. In the midst of a painful “thorn in the flesh” Paul asked God three times for relief (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Eventually God responded with an answer that surprised Paul. “No, I will not remove the thorn, but I will use it to refine you and to draw you closer to me.” Sometimes it isn’t the positive answers that we expect that most draw us to praise God, but His divine denials that come with divine explanations of a greater. God’s glorious strength is not magnified in our personal strength, but in our weakness. At times He allows us to fall on our faces. His denial of our prayer becomes our greatest blessing as it magnetically draws us to Him. The more we realize our utter dependence on Him the more we are equipped to praise Him. God-fearing people best understand this incredible truth. Are we willing to tell others about our prayer experiences?

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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