

THE BACKWARD PRAYER

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It about takes your breath away when you realize what it means! Here is a prayer that is a complete turnaround from the kind of prayers we are used to praying.

Instead of in their usual stance asking the Lord to give them something, the apostle John catches the disciples in a casual snapshot as they pray the Lord to receive something Himself. Water might as well start running uphill, you feel, as for a “backward” prayer like this to come from ordinary people like you and me: “In the meanwhile His disciples prayed Him, saying, Master, eat” (John 4:31).

Almost all the prayers the Lord receives in His communications center are the opposite: “Master, give us something to eat!” God is thought of as mankind’s great Santa Claus, and it is hoped that Christmas will come every day. “Thanks, Lord, for what You gave me yesterday. Now, for today I need this and that. And thanks again for keeping me in mind! Amen.”

When we learn to widen our horizons and pray for somebody else, God must be delighted. Fortunately, such prayers are offered—prayers for someone else to be healed, for someone else to be fed, even prayers for the whole world. The Lord Jesus taught us to pray for others, and these prayers are good; people who can pray for others are growing up spiritually. A child makes

tremendous progress when he can ask for a toy for his brother or sister or a neighbor child.

But too often, even when we ask for something for our fellowmen, we still have not moved far from our radius of egoism. If our prayer isn’t self-centered, it’s at least us-centered, and each of us knows his turn will come. We human beings, like pets at feeding time, feel our dependence on the Master of the household. At prayer time we line up together along the fence looking toward the big house, hungry for another handout. It’s fortunate for us that the Lord is on the other end of the line, gracious and happy to give us our daily bread.

But if we don’t ask the Lord for things for ourselves and for others, what can we pray about? The disciples’ “backward” prayer opens up a whole new world of understanding.

“Master, You Eat!”

The Master rarely hears a prayer like this one—a prayer in reverse gear: “Master, You eat, because we can sense that You are hungry. You’ve had a long, hard journey today, and it’s hot and dusty. Look, we’ve been to the shops in town and bought bread, butter, milk, raisins, figs, almonds—a tasty safari feast. Master, we’ve been thinking about You, and we understand how You feel. We know it’s no fun to be tired and hungry. Master, You eat!”

It’s a rare child who thinks of giving his benefactors anything. He may give Santa Claus credit for his Christmas gifts, but he finds it hard to think in terms of Santa-centeredness. Fat, jolly Santa with his toy factory at the North Pole—how

can Santa need either toys or food? And what else could he need?

It's almost as difficult for us to imagine the Lord Jesus as being in want. Since He is infinitely wealthy, who of us could give Him anything He needs, unless we think like the children in the Christmas ads who leave Santa a sandwich and a bottle of soda when he comes down the chimney? We give our little tithes and offerings, but who can seriously imagine that these trifles enrich the Lord? We expect perhaps a momentary smile of indulgent approval, after which He passes on in infinite plenitude, omniscient, omnipotent, with crowds of eager angels hovering around Him like secretaries and aides waiting at His beck and call. Even a Croesus couldn't add a feather's weight to God's treasure.

But here the Son of God sits in human poverty by Jacob's well. He is not playing thirsty; He really is thirsty. Does He have to stay thirsty? Can He really feel thirst as we do? If so, why should He not by a touch of His finger transform the old well into a refrigerated drinking fountain? If He really feels hunger, why not speak to a stone and transform it into a golden brown loaf of freshly baked bread? The power to do it was at His command.

In the days before the Model A, Henry Ford once took a party of wealthy friends for a drive in the country. One of the world's richest men, Ford could have summoned chauffeurs to drive a fleet of his Lincoln limousines. Instead, for some whimsical reason, Henry took a Model T.

As often happened with his customers' automobiles, the balky little machine broke down on the road. Unequipped to repair it himself, the famous car manufacturer found himself dependent on the services of a village mechanic. Determined not to capitulate to his joking guests, old Henry resisted the temptation to phone his factory to ask for Lincoln sedans to "rescue" the party. He faced the breakdown as any motorist would have to, and waited for the mechanic to repair the car.

His guests enjoyed the spectacle of the world's most famous car maker playing incognito to the unsuspecting country mechanic. "Charge him plenty," urged one of the passengers, "he's rich!"

"Then why doesn't he drive a good car?" asked the puzzled mechanic.

Christ Could Have Summoned Angels

In His hunger and thirst, Jesus could have summoned an army of angels to rescue Him any moment He wished. When, several years later, a mob brandishing swords and clubs shoved Him along to Caiaphas's house, He told His disciples about the rescue mission standing ready should He flash a "help" signal heavenward: "Don't you know that I could call on My Father for help, and at once He would send Me more than twelve armies of angels?" (Matthew 26:53, GNB). Isn't it a good thing we are not capable of yielding to such a temptation? We would keep the angels busy getting us out of all kinds of testing difficulties, as popular imagination long ago conceived of fairies running impossible errands for privileged people. One wonders if the angels enjoyed watching the Creator

of the world sitting by the well in Samaria waiting for someone to come along and offer Him a drink of water. Must the Lord of heaven and earth sit there on a hot day as helpless as any other pilgrim?

Yes, He must. The rules of the contest with Satan require that He lay aside His divine advantages. He chooses not to do anything supernatural to help Himself, even should He starve. He refuses to call “headquarters” and ask for a fleet of angel limousines to rescue Him. He must meet life’s problems exactly as we must meet them. The Father entrusts Him to the hospitality of the human race, and if they fail Him, He must perish as anyone else. When men at last crucify Him, He dies there on the spot.

Christ Has Become One of Us

The infinite Son of God has surrendered Himself to be enmeshed in our finite helplessness. Quite a risk this, that the Father took when He sent His Son to be the guest of sinful humanity. Did He make a mistake?

Fortunately, no. Our disciple heroes and other people took good care of Him and even urged Him to eat. Very likely the Samaritan woman herself was one of them. Can you imagine how she must have felt later that evening when Jesus was a guest in her village?

“Why, Master, I’ve just remembered—that drink of yours! I forgot all about it! Can You ever forgive me? And—what about lunch? Have you had anything all day? I’m going to cook you a proper supper now!”

Wouldn’t any good-hearted woman react the same way?

Not once, but probably many times, the disciples prayed this backward prayer, “Master, You eat. You get some rest; You go to bed. We’ll stay up and finish the dishes or do the laundry. You take a vacation. You get those new clothes You need.” It is likely that living with Him for three and a half years, they found many occasions for thinking about His needs. We read of social occasions when dinners were served in His honor in homes where He was welcomed as a guest. Anybody with simple human compassion who met Him on His earthly path would soon find a way to pray to Him a backward prayer.

But we are not so concerned now with stories of long ago. Just let us meet Him and see Him as He is today. Then our childish, self-centered prayers will appear badly out of date.

God Had Faith in Us

The disciples’ backward prayer, “Master, You eat,” gives a glimpse of even more astonishing prayers yet to come from human hearts. When I said that the Father entrusted His Son to the hospitality of the human race, I said something serious. What it means is that the Father brought Himself to trust that our fallen human nature would escape the rut of its self-centeredness and respond to the needs of His Son.

This is what lies behind this backward prayer of the disciples. Sending His Son to this world presupposed on God’s part a “backward faith” to begin with. Faith is what we usually think of as man’s part to have and to use. It is we who have

faith in God, for it is He who is trustworthy. (To a limited extent we have faith in one another too.) But what a staggering thought to realize that God has faith in man or He would never have sent His Son to us. This faith of God in man was exercised before the foundation of the world, when the Father and the Son agreed together to make an infinite sacrifice for man should he fall.

When John said, “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19), he could also have added, “We believe in Him because He first believed in us.” Paul has the same idea when he says, “What if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief [literally, their non-faith] make the faith of God without effect?” (Romans 3:3). There’s a play on words here in the original Greek that is beautiful: “Shall man’s non-faith cancel God’s faith?”

Which of us could bring himself to trust a converted thief enough to put in his hands every cent we possess, and expect him to keep it for us? Could you trust human nature that much? If you were trying to evangelize a band of notorious kidnappers, could you bring your-self to entrust your newly born son or daughter to their arms while you left for an extended trip overseas? That illustrates what God did!

Look at the Baby in the cattle pen at Bethlehem. Most people in the town slept just as well that night, not caring whether He survived or not. It was a rough way for any baby to get started in life. But there were some who did care, and they proved that God made no mis-take when He entrusted His precious Son to human hospitality. Although

humans eventually rejected and crucified Him, all along His way there were some whose kindness spilled over into a concern for the needs of the Son of God. It’s a beautiful sight to see Him cradled as a baby in the arms of a tender, loving human mother, and to see affectionate friends linger near Him all His earthly days, even to the end.

Christ-centered Prayers Today?

“Well,” you say, “what about us today? Do you imply that we, too, can get beyond the pets-at-feeding-time complex? Can we actually conceive a prayer that is Christ-centered instead of us-centered?”

I have no way of knowing what is in your heart except as I look inside my own. If I’m wide of the mark from now on, just write me off as the worst sinner you have seen. But I must own up to the truth that most of my prayers have been self-centered. What has kept me going as a Christian has usually been anxiety for my own salvation. What has driven me to keep the Sabbath, to pay tithe, to turn down the world’s pleasures, has been mostly my own desperate need for eternal security. I have been the hun-gry one. My soul has been too little to think or feel big enough to pray, “Master, You eat!” Day after day it’s been, “Master, I’m hungry!”

Perhaps you are beginning to suspect that you and I have something in common. I may even assume that I am talking to a fellow sinner. If so, let’s face up to it that this motive of following Christ in order to save our own skins or to achieve security, to get a reward or escape punishment,

isn't strong enough to withstand real temptation when it comes along. Such a motive will collapse even though it may enable us to stay in the church for some years. Our friends may even say of us, "If anyone will get to heaven, so-and-so will."

But we will have overlooked one strategic fact: The one who professes Christ from such a motive will have a price for selling out sometime. While a few may hold out longer, waiting for a higher price to be bid than others, the adversary knows how to maneuver us into a situation where the bidding will eventually reach our figure.

For some that price of selling out may be pathetically low—just the humdrum temptations of day-to-day living. For others it may be the fascination of money, the sweet ease of luxury, the thrill of prestige. For still others it may be illicit sex. The anticipation of the moment jams out the signal from heaven's broadcast, and the thought of expected reward in heaven or of dreaded punishment in hell fades out. If both signals are on the same wavelength of appeal to self, is it any wonder that lust drowns out the other? Both "zero in" on the egocentric plexus. In this area of temptation, a self-centered religious faith is as strong as a sand castle battered by ocean breakers.

Such a "faith" has always been useless. But the tests of the past were not always severe enough to show it up. A New Testament writer coined a brilliant phrase to describe the futility of such a self-centered "faith." He called it being "under the law." If Paul had been a cartoonist, he might have pictured the self-centered, fear-motivated, reward-earning

Christian as being pinned under a giant boulder labeled "the law." Another way of putting it is that he is under the "old covenant." Millions of sincere, earnest Christians today need to break loose from being "under the law" which is serving God either from fear of hellfire or for hope of reward. It's a futile way of life. It's ludicrous, but so tragic that we can't laugh (although Satan probably laughs at us, in anticipation of our going over to his side in the end).

Selfish "Faith" Cannot Endure

In these last days all selfish "faith" is headed for an almost overwhelming test. For many, unless they see the truth now, it will mean the ultimate defeat. To our superficial judgment, egocentric faith may have been "good enough" for our ancestors, as we sing the spiritual, "Give me that old-time religion; it's good enough for me." But it can never endure the tests of the final crisis unless it is purified from the dross of self-centeredness.

This test that the book of Revelation says will come to everyone living on earth will probe every man's soul for his/her hidden weakness. (A severe test called "the mark of the beast" is mentioned in Revelation 13:16-18.) Millions who today would be shocked at the suggestion of selling out their souls to the clever enemy of Christ have no idea what they would do if the bidding were to go high enough. The test will produce a heart-gripping fear unprecedented in human experience. The anxiety of a million sleepless nights of worry will be distilled into this final attempt of Satan to defeat God's followers by fear. This final allurements of the appeal

to security will play on the whole gamut of human temptability. It's Peter all over again tempted to deny Christ. Whether we sell out to Satan now for the trifling low bids of sensual temptation or hold out a little longer and sell out in the highest bid of Satan's finally perfected Temptation Supreme—this makes no difference in the end. Unless we find deliverance, all who are content to remain "under the law" will eventually deny and betray Christ.

Someone may say, "I feel rather lost now! I admit I'm self-centered, and my prayers revolve around myself and my little circle. I can't deny I'm in this religion largely for what I hope to get out of it. But what else is there for me to do?"

We Need to See

First, before we talk of doing anything, there is something for us to see. And having seen, as surely as our hearts are honest, this whole pathetic problem of a self-centered life will change through believing what we have seen.

What is there to be seen?

The Son of God crucified upon a cross. But how do we "see"? A movie cannot present it. If there had been a TV crew at Calvary shooting the entire scene just as it happened, even a full-color film wouldn't enable us to "see" it. Most of us would lackadaisically munch on popcorn during the telecast, and when it ended click the remote to another channel. In fact, the people who actually saw the real event at Calvary weren't converted merely by gawking. If seeing the physical event were necessary to convert us, we would have an excuse for complaining to God because He hasn't

shown us a film of the crucifixion scene or reenacted it for each of us to watch. Why didn't He keep a film for us, ready to program it on the world's TV stations when TV should be invented?

Seeing Christ crucified is something greater than any camera crew can capture. Although eleven disciples saw it happen with their own eyes, a man who wasn't present came to understand it best. He "saw" it focused. We will let his eyes be ours: "We thus judge, that if One died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

A World-shaking "Equation"

This man saw something more revolutionary than Einstein's $E = MC^2$ or his theory of relativity. From the scientist's innocent-looking little equation came the power of nuclear fission. But from Paul's simple equation came greater power—a moral force that turned the ancient world upside down and will turn your life upside down as well.

The equation seems disarming in its simplicity: "If One died for all"—it is the same as saying that had He not died for all, all would now be dead. In other words, "One died for all" equals "we all deserve to be dead." The life we live is not our own. With X-ray perception Paul saw you and me crucified when he saw Christ crucified.

The implications become staggering. Involved in the "equation" is the fact that we have nothing that we can truly call our own. What Paul says is that if Christ had not died for us, we would be in our

graves at this moment. A little reflection will show that this is not pious sentimentality, but cold fact.

Think back 2,000 years. Consider the corruption that degraded the world of that era. We think it's pretty bad in our world today, but in the hopelessness and depravity of that ancient world mankind was fast sinking into a pit of human pollution that unchecked would have destroyed human life as we know it. The inspired analysis of pagan Rome's influence on the world is that it would "devour the whole earth, and . . . tread it down, and break it in pieces" (Daniel 7:23). Christ actually did something to save that ancient world from destruction. His principles began working quietly in the Roman Empire to restore sanity and self-control. Even though His infant church was bitterly persecuted, the healing forces that He introduced began to permeate society. Christ truly "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). This is what Calvary really means.

How Much that You Have Is Really Yours?

Think of your own life now. Be honest and perceptive enough to trace every good thing about your life to its ultimate source. A millionaire's son inherits a fortune, but he has the sense to recognize that he inherited it rather than earned it. But suppose a man has the intellect and ability to earn a fortune—did he not also inherit the ability? Ultimately there is little difference between inheriting a fortune ready-made and inheriting the ability and circumstances to make a fortune. The gospel simply says in both instances: the fortune

is not really yours. If Christ had not died for you, all you would have that is yours is the grave.

This is stupendous. When I speak of myself I unwittingly appropriate what is His property. This body that I call "my own," this brain of "mine," "my" personality—none is truly mine.

Take my education or my character. At first thought I might suppose that here is something no one can take from me, and therefore it must be really "mine" in the true sense of the word. Haven't I worked to acquire it? But again I am mistaken. I have "learned" all this from my environment, and my environment has been enriched with the presence of Christ working through all the agencies that have blessed my mind and my soul. It's all the way from prenatal influences working in genetic inheritance to home upbringing, the influence of society, the schools, and every conceivable aspect of human life. The Holy Spirit is in the world and is producing a constant tension and conflict with the influences of evil. Every agency that has blessed my life—each is the purchase of Christ's cross.

This being so, once I have seen the "equation" of the cross, how can I regard anything that passes through my hands as mine? Am I really entitled to any more than a corpse can grasp?

We have been told that one-tenth of the money we earn belongs to God and nine-tenths belongs to us to do with as we please. The "equation" clarifies that confused thinking. Tithe is a token recognition that all I have belongs to Christ, and that His love alone shall dictate the use of the nine-tenths I have ignorantly claimed as my own.

How Much Do We Deserve?

Another naive idea I have cherished also collapses: “I deserve a good time.” “There is more pleasure in walking with Christ than our little cups can hold.” But the “good time” identified with selfish pleasure is only bitter dregs. Many good, sincere people still can’t tell the difference. Even those brought up as Christians can’t discern the distinction except in the light from the cross.

If “one died for all,” then “they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them.” In that light it is sheer fantasy for one to imagine that he deserves selfish pleasure. Can the bewitching spell of that fantasy be broken?

Yes, if Paul’s word “should” is not misunderstood when he says “that they should not . . . live unto themselves.” Here is no painful obligation, panting, struggling to do something bitter and burdensome. “One died for all, . . . that they which live” shall not, yes, cannot “henceforth live unto themselves.” The cross has passed an annihilating judgment on the egoism that is our problem, and has thus broken its spell over us. A stronger signal now comes through on the antenna, and the little “self” signal is drowned out.

What the far-seeing apostle really says is that you find it impossible to go on living a self-centered life after you have “seen” the cross. Anyone who has seen the “equation” simply cannot remain a lukewarm, half-and-half Christian.

Power in the Cross

Following our Lord is thus no longer forcing ourselves to try to do what is right, punishing ourselves, pushing ourselves against our will to do what we don’t want to do in order to get to heaven or to avoid being lost. The cross equation comes with a built-in power pack: “The love of Christ constraineth [motivates] us” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

No one who has seen Christ crucified, and who believes what he sees, can again be plagued with those vague feelings of remorse and self-hate for doing what he knows he shouldn’t. The nagging sense of “ought,” like low-hanging clouds shadowing the soul, is lifted. While it might be wrong to say that it becomes easy to do right (following Christ is never coasting downhill), it is true that the love of Christ seen and believed is a power plant that propels one on the upward path. Temptation obstacles flatten out before the power of this new “constraint.” Decisions that have been agonizingly difficult for us become simple when Paul’s equation is remembered: One died for me, otherwise I wouldn’t be here at this moment. How can my life be my own? Christ’s love has bought me. How can I possibly withhold myself from Him?

The lapse of 2,000 years since Paul’s day makes no difference in the power of the equation. None of the tempting allurements we face today can in any way stand up against it. Even if the devil had another thousand years to invent more subtle temptations to ensnare us, this simple truth we “see” at Calvary would nullify them all because it shorts out the circuit of our self-centeredness.

This is how the cross shifts the focus of our viewpoint. In fact, vision just begins when our self-centered complex is overcome. We can begin to look at things through the eyes of Christ. We are able to perceive something impossible to see otherwise. It is this:

He has a need today that is greater than at any time in the past since the Father entrusted Him to us. Jesus is still hungry; and the hunger He knows is the unsatisfied, unrequited love of a Bridegroom hungering for His bride to yield Him her wholehearted, entire love. We are enabled to sense that He deserves a reward, not we! He deserves a human-heart response to the "travail of His soul" that has not as yet been yielded Him.

A Simple Love Story

What has baffled theologians for centuries is reduced to the simple factors of a poignant love story. If you can appreciate a love story enough to "identify" with the disappointed hopes of a true lover, you have a part to play in this greatest love story of the ages. How much does a man love a woman? But a million times more profoundly "Christ also loved the church." Maybe you never thought of it in this connection before, but the Word says, "They two shall be one flesh." And the apostle adds immediately, lest we misunderstand, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:25, 31, 32).

You may ask, "Where do I fit in?" If you believe in Christ, you are a part of the "bride." Unless Christ is to remain forever "hungry," the time must come when it can be said, "The marriage of the Lamb is

come, and His wife hath made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

Edward was pacing the platform of the railway station at Knoxville, Tennessee, awaiting the arrival of Leta, his fiancée from Michigan. Their wedding was to be that evening. So eager was the bridegroom that he arrived two hours before train time.

When the train finally pulled in, Edward watched anxiously until the last passengers disembarked. There was no Leta among them.

Hiding mischievously within the train, she watched a pained look of distress form on his face like clouds disappointing a spring morning. Finally, she could stand it no longer. Rushing out, she threw herself into his arms.

With respect to His bride-to-be, Christ endures disappointment beyond description because of our human indifference. Are we hiding ourselves from Him, making Him sad and disappointed? Must it ever be so? Where is our heart response worthy of His love?

Would it not be the cruelty of the ages for us to continue holding Him at a distance, keeping Him waiting, unsatisfied, divinely hungry?

What can we say to Him? Is there some word of appreciation?

"Master, . . . !"