

Introduction - The Our Father

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Consider for a moment how our Lord's movement to Jerusalem and Golgatha is punctuated by prayer. Among the Gospels, Luke especially focuses on the prayers of Jesus. It is after Jesus is at prayer (Luke 9:18) that He describes for the disciples His coming passion (Luke 9:22). It is in conjunction with His praying that the disciples come and ask, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). His institution of the Lord's Supper is attended by prayer (Luke 22:17, 19). In the Garden of Gethsemane with the full burden of His atoning death immediately before Him, His extreme suffering is met with prayer: "He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him. And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:41-44). Even on the cross, Psalm 31:5 is on the Lord's lips: "Father into Your hands I commend My Spirit" (Luke 23:46). Matthew records the praying of Psalm 22:1: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt 27:45).

We must, like the disciples, ask the Lord, "Teach us to pray."

At Concordia Theological Seminary, daily prayer marks our worship, reflection and study. Our confession is that we are called to pray in a manner appropriate to God's character (i.e. in the language and categories of our Lord and His church). We particularly treasure the Psalter and daily pray it.

Why do we view prayer in such a fashion? One of the most penetrating answers to this question is provided by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a small volume entitled *The Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Augsburg, 1970). Here he writes: "Lord, teach us to pray!" So spoke the disciples of Jesus. In making this request, they confessed that they were not able to pray on their own, that they had to learn to pray. The phrase "learning to pray" sounds strange to us. If the heart does not overflow and begin to pray by itself, we say, it will never "learn to pray." But it is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with Him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ . . .

And so we must learn to pray. The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. By means of the speech of the Father in heaven His children learn to speak with Him. Repeating God's own words after Him, we begin to pray to Him. We ought to speak to God and He wants to hear us, not in the false and confused speech of our heart, but in the clear and pure speech, which God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words, which come from God, become, then, the steps on which we find our way to God.

In a day when Scriptural language and realities are thought to need revision and streamlining to have an impact, our Lord's Lenten prayers point the way to the pure and forever fresh speech of God. Our love for the Psalms and affection for the historic liturgies and hymnody of the church are due to their fidelity to Sacred Scripture—a fidelity that has made them available across cultures and through the centuries of the

church's life. This is very different from reprimand or stodgy traditionalism. No, our love for these words is that they are given by our Lord through His prophets and apostles. They teach us, who are so inclined to babble, to speak clearly, and more important than speaking clearly, to behold the character of the Triune God in the face of Jesus Christ.

May we pray as He prayed, especially as we behold the Lamb of God, bear our sins to oblivion in His holy suffering and atonement. And, may the Father's absolution on us all in Christ's resurrection renew, refresh and restore you until all our prayers will be transformed to worship before God's throne forever.

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