



The possibility of prayer

So many of us find praying a difficult and frustrating exercise. To our feeling, our prayers bounce off the ceiling; God just doesn't seem to hear. We're sure: God is too busy directing this world and fighting evil to pay attention to me. And: with so many other millions praying at the same time, who am I that God should listen to sinful me?! We're sure, our prayers bounce off the ceiling.

In this article I wish to consider the question of why prayer is possible. I wish to draw out that God in Jesus Christ has restored the bond with God we broke in Paradise, and so we can freely speak with God again.

Covenant

Triune God had existed by Himself from all eternity. Though never lonely, it pleased Him – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – to create a world. The crown of His creating work was the formation of the creature man. With this creature, and with this creature alone, the Almighty Creator made a covenant. The covenant which the Creator made with the creature man implied that there now existed – by God's sovereign decree – a relation of friendship and mutual interest between God and man. So it was that God spoke to man, told Adam and Eve in Paradise particular things, told them for example where they were to live, what they were to do, why they existed. Indeed, it was the Lord's practice to visit Adam and Eve in their garden in the "*cool of the day*" (Genesis 3:8).

Yet it wasn't only so that God would speak to man; man was also to speak to God. God came to Adam and Eve in the Garden, and that gave Adam and Eve opportunity to praise their Visitor for what He had made; they'd spent the day working with God's creation, admiring it, and so were confronted with His glory (Psalm 19). When He came to visit, they could speak with God, tell Him what they thought of His handiwork, could tell Him also about what they did in His world in the course of the day, yes, could also ask Him for information when they ran stuck in their gardening. The point is: there was open communication between God and man. The Creator would talk with the creature man, and that creature would talk with his Creator. The Creator was genuinely interested in the thoughts and concerns, the ups and downs, of the creature man, for God had established His covenant with man, had made Himself their Father. That open communication from the creature to the Creator, from the child to the Father: *that is prayer*.

The fall

Where does our problem with praying come from then? *It comes from our fall into sin*. For in our fall into sin, we broke our covenant with God in favour of establishing a bond with Satan. We broke that covenant with God, and in so doing made it impossible for ourselves to *speak with* God. God came to Adam and Eve after they fell, but – say the Scriptures –

when "*they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day..., the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*"

(Genesis 3:8)

What Adam and Eve did not want after their fall was to speak with God; they were mortally afraid of God. And that was not because God had changed; it was rather because they had *themselves* changed. By their fall into sin, they had as it were slapped their Father across the face, rejected Him. And now meet Him, speak with Him as if nothing had happened?! No, their guilty conscience prevented that. They *could* not talk with God, *could* not pray.

Redemption

Here now is the marvel: the sovereign Creator who had graciously formed a Father/child relation with the creature man, *"called to"* the fallen man (Genesis 3:9). Though man had made it impossible to speak to God, God *yet wished to speak to man*. As the Church has summarised it in the *Belgic Confession*:

"when (man) trembling fled from Him", "our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man" (Art 17).

God in mercy wished a restoration of the broken relationship, wished to speak with man, wished man to speak with Him. God had no delight in that broken covenant.

God sought out His unfaithful covenant partner. He spoke to Adam and Eve words of grace: I will destroy Satan, I will deliver you from the misery and death into which you plunged yourselves, and I will re-establish the covenant with you which you broke, I will once again make you My children and I will be your Father (Genesis 3:15). *Here is the gospel of redemption*: the seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent, and the blessed result of that redemption would be that sinners would be reconciled to God, so reconciled that the warm relation of the beginning would be restored. In a word: *we can speak with God again, can pray!*

Result

So it happened. The seed of the woman – Jesus Christ – fought with the devil on Calvary, defeated Him, ransomed a lost people from the power of the devil. That lost people was reconciled to God, was made again children of God. So *complete* is the restoration which Christ obtained on the cross that these redeemed sinners are allowed to speak with God *just as Adam and Eve spoke with God in the beginning*. As Adam and Eve knew no fear of God in Paradise, so God's people today need not know any fear in speaking to God. As Adam and Eve knew no inhibitions, but could – free of sin as they were – speak openly with God, so we who have been redeemed by Christ may speak openly with God, may tell the Lord what is on our minds. Through the blood of Christ our sins are gone, so that nothing hinders our access to God (Ephesians 2:18). The apostle to the Hebrews puts it this way: we have boldness *"to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus"* (Hebrews 10:19). *"The Holiest"* is a reference to God's presence, to God Himself. By the blood of the Saviour, we are permitted into God's holy presence. That being the case, the apostle continues, *"let us draw near"* (vs. 22). The apostle would not have us hesitate, would instead have us freely enter the presence of God to speak with Him, to pray. In fact, Jesus Himself is ever in heaven now to intercede on behalf of those for whom He died. That being the case, we are now *"commanded to call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator"* (Art 26). Thanks to the work of the Christ, speaking with our Creator may now characterise the life of the Christian.

Answered

And the promise is this: God *shall hear what we wish to say to Him*. Almighty God is keenly interested in those for whom He once gave up His only Son. If He loved us so much that He gave up His Son for our salvation, will He now *not* hear us when we speak to Him?!! It's the promise of the Saviour:

"ask, and it will be given you... For every one who asks receives... Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ...If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

(Matthew 7:7ff)

And: "Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."

(John 14:13)

In Paul's words: *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"*

(Romans 8:32)

Content

In light of what the Receiver of our prayers has done in order to make prayer possible, what shall we say to this God? Our habit tends to be to keep prayers rather general. We'll pray for food, for work, for the children, for a blessing on our club meeting, a blessing for the church and the officebearers, we'll pray for the sick and mission and the school and the persecuted and the poor. That's all good. But consider for a moment: are *these* the things that are important to you? Sure, food and work, church and mission are important, and need certainly to receive a place in our conversations with the Father in heaven. But we all know that there come moments when other things are more pressing on our minds than these things. We're running late because we're slept in, we're frustrated because we can't get to sleep, the toast is burnt and what's Dad going to say: these and so many more little things are the nuts and bolts of daily living, the things that take up so much of our mind and our time. Our thought is: God is not interested in these sorts of petty things; it's irreverent to mention such things to Almighty God and to ask Him for strength to cope. Yet we need to recall: even *"the very hairs of your head are all numbered"* (Matthew 10:30). That is: our Father in Jesus Christ most certainly is interested even in these little things. Very well, let us talk to Him then not only about work and children, church and mission; let us talk to Him also about the toast, about the sleep in, about the – whatever is on our minds. And ask for the strength that's needed in the circumstances. Remember: the Bible does not divide life into two parts, one part that interests God and another part that doesn't. The Catechism says it this way: God has commanded us to ask of Him *"all the things we need for body and soul."* That's comprehensive, it excludes nothing.

Conclusion

We have those moments when we feel as if our prayers bounce off the ceiling. We need to bear in mind who our God is. Adam and Eve in Paradise could speak freely and openly with their covenant God about whatever was on their minds. Because of Jesus' work on the cross, we may do so too. And He hears – regardless of how we feel. Nothing is too big for a mention in our conversations with God; nothing is too small for a mention either. Father wants to hear what's on the minds of His children.

"You are of more value than many sparrows."

(Matthew 10:31)

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