

## Reasons for Prayer

Suppose you are in big trouble. However, you do not know very well the only person who can help you immediately. What can you say to encourage him or her to take time, effort, and meet the expense to help you? It is not enough to say, "I am in trouble." You can appeal to his or her expertise, but that does not touch the reason why he or she should take the time, make the effort, or meet the expense of using his or her expertise. You can appeal to his or her generous nature. Even that is risky if you have not had a prior friendly relationship. It is even more difficult if in the past you have been nasty to him or her.

We say that our own need and our neighbour's need should make us willing to pray. However, that does not offer God a reason for praying to Him in our need. Sometimes we appeal to God's expertise. The clause at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, "who art in heaven" does that. God in heaven has all power and wisdom. He knows how to help, and is able to help. The doxology that the early church added to the Lord's Prayer also includes, "For Thine is ... the power."

What when we ask, further, "Though we are in need, and though God has the wisdom and power to help, why should He trouble to help?" we can follow the lead of earlier Christians. At the beginning of most traditional collects there was a relative clause immediately after the address, stating in what capacity God was being approached. We can appeal to His nature. He has revealed Himself as a God of love and compassion. That gives us the hope of a relationship to Him. He wants to be addressed as "Father." That encourages us to approach Him as His children. The Lord's Prayer does that I "Our Father." The doxology that the early church added to the Lord's Prayer, "For Thine is the kingdom" may also be understood in that way. The kingdom of God was a leading theme in Jesus' teaching. God not only rules in His kingdom of power, but also in His kingdom of grace.

The problem reaches its deepest level when we look at our guilt and we ask, "Why should He listen to us?" The Israelites had worshipped the golden calf soon after God had given His commandments at Mount Sinai, and God had announced His intention to destroy them all. It is instructive to look at Moses' reasons when he interceded for the Israelites. He acknowledged that the reasons why God should act lay entirely in Himself. He reminded the Lord of His power. He had brought them out of Egypt with His great power. He reminded God of the damage to His own good name. The Egyptians would describe Him as an unjust and vindictive God. They would say: "He has taken them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth."

However, Moses went one step further. He took God's promises, and held them up to Him. "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self. You promised them: 'I shall make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I shall give to your descendants all this land that I have promised, and they will inherit it for ever.'"

We often do that in our prayers when we conclude them with: "through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord." We know that God will hear our prayers for Jesus' sake. We ask God not to look at our guilt, as a reason to deny our prayer. We remind Him to take account of what Jesus has done for us. Otherwise, we have no reason why He should listen to us.

We have another instructive example of the giving reasons God when we pray in Moses' intercession after ten of the spies gave a discouraging report about Canaan. The people grumbled against Moses and Aaron all night. They were saying that it would have been better to die in Egypt or in the wilderness. They blamed God for bringing them to a land where they would die in battle and their wives and children would be taken as plunder. They talked about appointing a different leader to take them back to Egypt.

By this time the Israelites had seen enough of God's justice to know that they should not mess with Him. Events were soon to show that again. The ten spies who brought a bad report were struck down by a plague and died. The Israelites were condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years, one year for each day the spies had spent in Canaan. Their bodies of all the adults fell in the wilderness, except for the remaining two spies,

Caleb and Joshua. Their children, who, they said, would be taken as plunder, entered the promised land.

However, how was Moses to reply when God showed His glory, and asked Moses, “How long will these people scornfully reject Me? How long are they going to refuse to believe in Me, in spite of all the miraculous signs that I have been performing among them? I shall strike them down with a plague and drive them out. Then I shall make you into a greater and mightier people than they are.”

Again, Moses appealed to God’s own good name. “Then the Egyptians will hear about this! For by Your power You have brought these people up from among them. They will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that You, the LORD, are among the Israelites, that You, the LORD, have been appearing face to face, that Your Cloud is standing over them, and that You are going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. If You kill all these people as one man, then the nations who have been hearing this report about You will say: ‘Because the LORD could not bring these people into the land that He had sworn to give them, He slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”,

Moses then reminded God of His promises, and of His revelation of Himself on Mount Sinai. There, God had told Moses about His nature as He showed His glory. As the LORD passed in front of Moses, He proclaimed: “The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in unfailing mercy and truth, who preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. He certainly does not declare anyone exempt from punishment. He avenges the wrongdoing of the fathers upon the children and upon the children’s children, upon the third and fourth generation.”

Moses remembered those words. Moses used those very words, in which God put His nature on the line. Moses’ intercession for the Israelites took God’s own words and held them back at Him. He pleaded, “Now then, please let the strength of my Lord be great, as You promised, when You said: ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in mercy. He forgives wrongdoing and rebellion. He certainly does not declare anyone exempt from punishment. He avenges the wrongdoing of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.’ Please forgive the wrongdoing of these people, according to Your great mercy, and as You have been pardoning this people from Egypt even until now.”

The Lord’s response was immediate. He said, simply, “I have forgiven them, as you have asked.” Admittedly, His forgiveness did not remove the heavy penalty that the people had to suffer, in wandering for many years in the wilderness without entering Canaan. Their children had to suffer with them for their unfaithfulness. However, the chief thing even for them was that God would still be a God of mercy. They could still bring their sacrifices to make atonement. Knowing that His nature was merciful and slow to anger, they could still present their sacrifices as a soothing odour to the Lord.

The reasons we can give to God for hearing our prayers in our many needs do not lie in ourselves, but in Him. His merciful nature and His promises are revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Because our Father has redeemed us through His Son’s obedience, He also deserves all the praise. As the doxology in the Lord’s Prayer, we say to the God, who hears prayer, “for Thine is ... the glory.”