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Faith and prayer

How are we to interpret the “prayer promises” of the Bible?

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IN TWO PASSAGES ON prayer Jesus make such breath-taking promises that the modern Christian stands bewildered and the unbeliever turns away in scorn: “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if ye ask anything in my name, I will do it.” (Jn. 14:13-14). And, “For verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass, he shall have whatsoever he saith” (Mk. 11:23-24).

Apparently and on the surface these promises put omnipotence in our hands. The evangelist can pray and all in his meeting will be saved. The pastor can pray and his congregation will be doubled immediately. The seminary student can pray and he will know Greek without studying. No fairy with her three wishes could offer more. But the price of this interpretation is to reduce the Bible to a fairy tale.

That Christian experience contradicts this interpretation is clear. Pastors do not double their congregations so easily, nor do all accept Christ for whom the evangelist might pray. And the student who does not study is not showing superior spirituality, he is simply shirking his Christian obligations.

But some devout and mystical souls object. They say that the promises of God should not be measured by the frailty of human experience. It is of course true, they admit, that congregations are not so doubled and Greek is not so learned; but far from impugning God's promises, this only indicates a lack of faith. If a man really believes and does not doubt in his heart, he can buy U.S. Steel today at 100 and sell it tomorrow at 200. What we need is faith.

An inference drawn from this line of thought results in a person's forcing himself to believe what he knows he does not believe. By a violent effort of will he tries to convince himself that God has already granted his request. Perhaps with only a dim consciousness of his motivation he thinks to himself, “If I can force myself to believe that I shall know Greek or double my money on the stock market, I will bring the Lord under obligation to do what I ask, no matter what it may be.”

Such a conclusion seems not only ridiculous, but even impious. Surely God does not place His omnipotence entirely at the disposal of our every whim. What if two persons should simultaneously pray for incompatible events? One might pray for rain today, while the other prayed for dry weather? Monica prayed that her son Augustine might not go to Rome; while Ambrose, if he had known Augustine, might have prayed for his coming. It will not do to say that Monica and Ambrose both wanted Augustine's salvation. This is true, but the specific requests were incompatible. Rain and fair weather too may in different minds be considered to lead to the most desirable state of affairs, but the specific requests are in conflict. One may say, "Let this mountain be removed"; another says "Let the beautiful scenery remain where it is."

It is not only common sense and logic that show the superficiality of this interpretation of the prayer of faith. The Scriptures give us the same warning also. The clearest example is God's refusal to grant Paul's prayer for better health (2 Cor. 12:7-9). In this case did Paul force himself to believe that he would be cured? If he did, then on this extreme and superficial interpretation God broke His promise. If he did not, it would be hard to prove that Christians today should follow, particularly in trivial matters, a procedure Paul did not use in a matter of some importance. One might also consider Christ's prayer in Gethsemane. It is true that Christ prayed, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine be done"; but this only emphasizes His lack of faith that this cup would pass from Him. If therefore in some sense Christ lacked faith, it cannot be in any derogatory sense; so that if we took lack faith with respect to a special petition, our lack cannot be diagnosed as an evidence of spiritual immaturity or as a sin.

There is another promise, expressed two or three times in the Gospels, in which the same principle is embedded. By adding it to the previous two and keeping them all in mind, we can more easily understand what Christ meant. After Peter's confession of Christ's deity at Caesarea Philippi, the Lord said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19). This promise was not given to Peter alone as an individual, as the Roman Catholics seem to believe. In Mathew 18:18 and John 20:23 the same promise is given to all the disciples and to the Church as a whole. "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven" and "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained."

But can this mean that a man's eternal destiny depends on the mere decision of a congregation? Is an ecclesiastical officer really able to open or shut the gates of heaven? Can the Pope release from purgatory or from hell? Is the vote of the Presbytery the voice of God? What if one Church retains a sin and then the sinner goes to another which remits it? It is incredible that God should be at the beck and call of human caprice, and it is absurd that He should grant contradictory petitions. Yet the question is

all the more insistent, What do these verses mean?

First, the remitting and retaining of sins, as an action of the Church, must be accomplished according to specifications. If God has decreed that there is no other name whereby we must be saved, a rebellious sect or an apostate denomination cannot remit sins apart from Christ's finished work. To use some old but perfectly good terms, the power of the keys is ministerial and declarative. Christians open and shut the gates of heaven by preaching the Gospel. They open to believers and they shut against the impenitent.

Second, the superficial and extreme interpretation misunderstands the nature of faith. Faith is not an activity or state of mind that men can generate of their own natural resources. Faith is a gift, a gift of God. Whether a man has faith or not depends first and last and entirely upon God. He gives faith to whom He chooses. And though He could and might give me the faith to double my money over night in the stock market, I do not expect Him to give anyone a knowledge of Greek without study. In His omnipotence God can do the one or the other; but aside from some usual cases, in times of persecution, great missionary danger, or serious crisis, God does not do such things. Nor does He frequently do so even in times of serious danger and persecution. This we learn from the Scriptures. God did not rescue the apostles from hardship or from execution.

Third, the verse in John says that we must pray "in my name." Here indeed misunderstanding leaves off and understanding begins. To pray in Christ's name is not to use such a phrase at the end of our prayers. It is rather to identify oneself with Christ's will and purpose. We pray or act as His representative. We make ourselves one with Him. The item of our prayer that is in Christ's name is the item that is agreeable to Christ's will, "that the Father may be glorified in the Son," as verse thirteen says. The will and purpose of Christ are identical with the Father's, and as eternal. This will is the eternal decree by which God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. A prayer or petition therefore that accords with this eternal decree cannot fail to be granted. Its accomplishment has been determined before the foundation of the world. The original misunderstanding and paradox is removed by considering the sovereignty of God. Instead of trying to bring omnipotence under the power of our whim, we should recognize that our whims and our serious purposes as well are under the omnipotent power of Almighty God.

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