

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more particularly, the means of grace. We have been examining the topic of prayer for some time. Last week we looked at the fact that prayer is a significant part of our fellowship with God. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by pointing out that our lives and prayers should be infused with thanksgiving.

Marc Roby: Well, we certainly do have a lot to be thankful for! God has taken away eternal hell and given us eternal heaven in its place.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, he has, quite literally, given us *everything* that is good. He gave us life. He gave us every opportunity and ability that we have, he is responsible for every good thing that we enjoy in this life. And, as we saw last week, he has even restored our fellowship with him.

It is sin that causes all of our troubles. Our own sin and the sin of others. But everything good comes from God. And he even minimizes the pain we experience as a result of sin. He only has us experience that pain which is necessary to purify us and perfect us.

Marc Roby: As the hymn says, "A father's hand will never cause His child a needless tear."¹

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a great truth, which is one way of expressing what Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."² Or we can look at Hebrews 12:10 where we are told that "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness." We know that whatever suffering we go through in this life is used by God for our good. We are his children, not his enemies.

Marc Roby: Paul even wrote in Romans 5:3-5 that "we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

Dr. Spencer: That is something that the world simply does not understand. A true Christian recognizes that God is sovereign even over the very worst things that can happen to us in life. The death of a child, or a spouse, a fatal disease, a terrible accident. It doesn't matter what it is, it did not happen outside of God's sovereign control. There are no real accidents in the true sense

¹ Our Times are in Thy Hand, lyrics by William F. Lloyd, Music by Henri A.C. Malan, (<https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/681>)

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of the word. There certainly are things that happen that we don't intend to have happen, and in that sense they can be called accidents, but nothing is outside of the control of God.

Marc Roby: We read in Matthew 10:29 that Jesus told his disciples that they don't need to fear the world. He said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father."

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful promise and it is one of many reasons we have for being filled with thanksgiving. Therefore, we must pray with thanksgiving. If we aren't thankful, then we aren't Christians. We haven't come to know how sinful we are and what our sins justly deserve. We have not yet experienced the joy of having the weight of our sin removed.

Marc Roby: I can't imagine someone being born again and not being filled with thanksgiving for all that God has done for them.

Dr. Spencer: Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." We have so much to be thankful for that it must be a continual part of virtually every prayer. It may not always be spoken, especially in short prayers, but it should be part of our attitude at all times.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of Colossians 3:17, where the apostle Paul wrote, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Dr. Spencer: And in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Paul wrote, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." We could cite many examples in the Bible of people giving thanks and many places where we are told to give thanks, but I think that once you realize it, it is obvious that anyone who has an understanding of what God has done for us in giving us life and then giving us new life in Christ, simply *must* be filled with overflowing gratitude to God.

We briefly mentioned this point before, but it deserves to be emphasized. In Session 194 we noted that the third benefit John Calvin says we derive from prayer is, "that we may be prepared to receive all [God's] benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand."³

Marc Roby: I think it is important that Calvin adds the adjective true to that statement. In other words, our gratitude and thanksgiving must be genuine. It is easy to say thank you and not really mean it in any deep sense of the word.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, I agree. In fact, I think people, even true Christians, do it all the time. For example, when we "give thanks" for a meal, are we truly thankful to God? Or do we think that

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, Book III, Chapter 20, Paragraph 3, pg. 565

we have somehow earned the meal? That we deserve it? We need to be aware that even though we went to work and earned the money to buy the food, God gave us the ability. He provided the job for us. He provided the conditions necessary for the food to be available for us to purchase and so on. There have been lots of people throughout history who were hungry in spite of being willing to work!

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a particularly good thing for people living in a rich country like America to remember. It is very easy to take such things for granted.

Dr. Spencer: But we should never take any of our blessings for granted. There is a continuous spectrum of how thankful a person can be and Christians should be at the extreme end of that spectrum. Imagine how thankful you would be if you were drowning and some stranger came and risked his own life to save you. Well, we weren't just drowning in sin, we were dead. And Jesus didn't just risk his life to save us, he gave his life to save us. There should be no limit to our gratitude and it should infuse all of our prayers and, in fact, our entire lives.

Marc Roby: I have to say "Amen" to that.

Dr. Spencer: When King David decided he wanted to build a temple for God. God sent the prophet Nathan to tell David that he was not the one to do it, but that his son would. And God also told David that his kingdom would endure forever. David responded with a wonderful prayer of thanksgiving. It begins, as we read in 2 Samuel 7:18, with David praying, "Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?"

Marc Roby: Again, that is a statement to which I can wholeheartedly agree.

Dr. Spencer: And all Christians should be able to agree, independent of our worldly circumstances. If we understand that we deserve hell, then if we experience anything other than hell it is grace for which we should be thankful. We need to remember that not being thankful is one of the signs Paul gives in Romans to describe those who are suppressing the truth and against whom God's wrath is revealed. In Romans 1:18 we read that "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness". And then, in describing these people further, Paul writes in Verse 21, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Marc Roby: That is terrible condemnation. But it does clearly show that not being thankful is a sign of rebellion against God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:6-7, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." It isn't just that we should be a little bit thankful, we should be overflowing with thankfulness. And later on in that same letter, in Colossians 4:2, Paul commands us to, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

Marc Roby: Now, I don't know how many Christians today could accurately describe themselves as being devoted to prayer.

Dr. Spencer: I think the answer is few. But I think we have said enough about the need for us to be thankful in our prayers. So, I'd like to move on and look at a common acrostic used by many Christians to help them in prayer. That acrostic is ACTS.

Marc Roby: Which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

Dr. Spencer: And it is one way to help yourself learn how to have a more productive prayer life. I would warn against following any formula in a mechanical sort of way, but this acrostic provides a reasonable summary of the necessary elements in prayer. First, there is adoration.

Marc Roby: Webster's dictionary says that to adore someone is to worship or honor them as divine or to regard them with loving devotion.⁴

Dr. Spencer: All of which apply in this case of course. This is a part of prayer that I think many Christians omit or, at least, cut very short. But it is an important part of prayer. It is part of our fellowship with God to remind ourselves of who God is and what he has done. I again don't want to be formulaic, but I find it useful to sometimes recite the answer to the fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism in my prayers.

Marc Roby: Which is, of course, that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.⁵

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a great answer. And when I go over that I go slowly and spend a little time meditating on each of those attributes. There are many other ways to approach prayer of course. Catechisms are a good source of material, but the best source is the Bible itself.

Marc Roby: And certainly, the psalms are, in large measure, prayers to God. In fact, Psalm 100 is a famous and short one which has only five verses, so let me read it. "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."

Dr. Spencer: That is a great example. You could take a psalm like that, read it over and then go back and meditate on and personalize each verse. That would be a great way to adore God as part of your prayer time. And notice that that psalm also includes thanksgiving, so it again emphasizes that we don't want to be too strict with the formula. Adoration and thanksgiving can go together.

⁴ Webster's

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer to Question #4

And that is how we learn to pray. We read the Bible, we read the prayers of great saints. We read the catechisms. Prayer isn't something that comes naturally. It takes work. But it is well worth the effort.

Marc Roby: And it is pleasing to God. He delights in his people taking time to know him better and to give him the praise and thanksgiving that he deserves, and to come to him in confession and with their earthly needs and desires.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. And the next letter in our acrostic, ACTS, is the letter 'C'. We must come to God with confession. Confession isn't something that we do once at the beginning of the Christian life. It is a continual part of the Christian life because we are sinners in need of forgiveness. And it is important for us to take time to ask God to forgive us for specific sins, not just some general statement like "please forgive my sins." Now, there is nothing wrong with such a statement, but we also need to take time to confess our sins individually and in detail. Doing so helps us to be more aware of them and to see how odious they really are and it gives time for God to reveal to us even greater depth to our sin. As we confess it in detail for example, God might cause us to recall what led up to the sin and bring us to see that we knew what was coming and didn't take the way out that he provided.

Marc Roby: You are, of course, alluding to 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul tells us that "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's the verse I was referring to of course. Prayer is a time when God can communicate with us by directing our thoughts. He can cause us to remember details, he can bring particular passages of the Bible to mind, he can bring to mind particular sermons or good books that we have read and so on. But for that to be true, our prayers cannot be rushed. We need to take time and be careful. We must want to hear from God.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that many of our listeners will argue that they are very busy and can't take a lot of time for prayer.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure they will, and I'm sure that there is some truth in that statement. It is more true for some than for others of course, but the bottom line is that if you are a Christian, prayer should be a priority in your life. It is something you *must* make time for. I remember a story I heard about Martin Luther, I don't know if it is true or not because I can't remember where I read or heard it, but he supposedly said something like, "I have a lot to do today, so I have to spend longer in prayer."

Marc Roby: That's a very counterintuitive idea for most people I think.

Dr. Spencer: It is. But if we have a lot of work to do, and especially if it is very difficult work, who knows more about how to do it than God?

Marc Roby: The answer is, obviously, no one.

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. So spending time in prayer is hardly a waste of time. Now, don't get me wrong, what we said a couple of weeks ago is also true. Prayer can be used as a way of avoiding the work you know you should do. So there is wisdom and balance needed here. But I have found at times that praying for guidance on a given problem is used by God to focus my thought on the key points and has, on occasion, helped me solve a problem much more quickly.

Marc Roby: Very well. We have now covered the first three letters of ACTS; adoration, confession and thanksgiving. What would you like to say about the last one, supplication?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first off, I want to define the term. I don't think it is a common word. Supplication means to make a humble entreaty according to Webster's.⁶ In other words, this is where we ask God to do things for us and for others. And I don't think we need to spend much time discussing this item. I would only say that we must be honest with God. Ask for the things you really want him to do for you. Be bold. But then also go back and look at what we have said in earlier sessions. You must be sincere and humble for example. And you must sincerely want only what is in the will of God, which is what is best for you and for others. So, in a sense, we have already discussed supplication extensively.

Marc Roby: Very well, do you have anything else you would like to say today?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Many people find that having a prayer list is a good idea. I certainly use one. But I would once again warn against being formulaic. If you find yourself just reading your prayers to God, that is not a real conversation. But there is nothing wrong with praying for some of the same things every day. God tells us to be persistent.

Marc Roby: Jesus told us the parable of the persistent widow⁷ for that very purpose.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. So, for example, you should pray for the salvation of loved ones often, even every day. That is not needless repetition, that is persistence. And having a list of that sort of thing to help you is fine. But be sure that you are having a real conversation and deal with each day's issues as well. Reading through the Bible systematically is helpful in this regard also. The reading will provide ideas for your prayers. And that is part of having a real conversation with God.

Marc Roby: I have certainly found that to be true. And I think that we are out of time for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd love to hear from you.

⁶ Webster's

⁷ Luke 18:1-8