

John - Commentaries by Ebenezer John Thomas

Practical Remarks on Prayer, Prayer, Practical Remarks on: 8. Prayer in the Name of Christ (16:23-27)

8.—Prayer in the Name of Christ

This goes well with the unrestricted privilege conferred; but how ill it would assort with a statement that it related to some only of the believer's prayers, that it did not extend to his personal needs or circumstances; that these were outside Christ's interests; that believers might go to God about them, but not in Christ's name! How would all this match with the direction, "Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full"? So chilling a declaration would quench anything like fullness of joy, and regret, rather than joy, would be the consequence of such a narrow interpretation as that sought to be imposed. So far no positive scripture for the doctrine has been shown, and the style and manner of our Lord, in speaking on the subject, are repugnant to the very notion. The article says— "By praying in His name, then, we understand appearing before the Father on His behalf, and as warranted to be there by Him, so that we are there with all the Son's claim upon the Father's heart, and taken up in the power of the Holy Ghost to utter and pray for, in communion with His own heart, all that He Himself desires to be accomplished for the Father's glory and His own joy. Praying then in His name is to intercede for His own interests, His own desires, objects and ends. If this be so, this character of prayer has no reference to our own personal needs or circumstances, indeed, it could not." But this is mere assertion—simply what the writer "understands," as he says. That, however, is not Christian teaching. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). We have no inspired teachers now, so that teaching, to be profitable, must be shown to be based upon that which is inspired—scripture. What a man merely "understands" cannot edify, because he may be right or he may be wrong; and by accepting what he says, I may be allowing my mind to assimilate as truth that which is really error. Teaching must be certain if it is to build up the soul—it must have the certainty of Scripture for its basis. However, it is postulated that prayer in Christ's name is only about a certain class of subjects which are defined as "Christ's own interests, His own desires, objects and ends." But where is the authority for saying that Christ's "interests, desires, objects and ends" cannot include the "personal needs or circumstances" of His saints? This, again, is pure assumption, a demarcation of the subjects of prayer which is quite arbitrary and artificial. Is it not also a misrepresentation of the heart of Christ towards His people, to say that their interests are not within the circle of His interests? Scripture tells us that He is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4.). Even of Israel it is said, "In all their affliction he was afflicted." "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye" (Isa. 63:9; Zech. 2:8). Did He not say to Saul of Tarsus, "Why persecutest thou me?" The shepherd in the parable laid the sheep upon his shoulders, and bore it right home, a figure of Christ's care over the individual believer all along the way (Luke 15).

How then is it possible that the personal needs or circumstances of saints can be foreign to the interests of Christ? It upsets the dearest conception of the character of that blessed One, to say that the circumstances of saints are outside the circle of His interests.

Now, according to Scripture, what governs the granting of requests under the promise we are discussing is not the subjects of the prayers, but their being in Christ's name—that is, truly in Christ's name. Thus a prayer about gospel-work (which certainly is Christ's "own interest") may be out of harmony with the mind of the Spirit, astray from the Spirit's guidance as to place, time, or other matters, and therefore not truly in Christ's name; while on the other hand, a prayer about family, or business, or other "personal needs or circumstances," may be fully under the guidance of the Spirit, and truly presented in Christ's name to the Father. The real question then is not the subject of the prayer, but having the mind of the Spirit about it: that is, whether what I ask about it is that which I can ask in CHRIST'S NAME. The subject may be the smallest or the greatest, but if one is led by the Spirit to make the request in Christ's name, the prayer so presented will be honored. It may relate to any subject—illness, poverty, personal failure, business affairs, difficulties with unreasonable men, yea, everything that affects the pathway of the saint below, just as much as the state of assemblies, the gospel, or missions abroad—for the word is "IN EVERYTHING by prayer and supplication" "let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4). What a deprivation would it be not to have the name of the Lord Jesus in which to go to God about all these things!

But, says the article, "this is not praying in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." In whose name then is it? Has not His sacrificial work laid the basis for answering every prayer that is according to God's will? About our needs and circumstances, therefore, we go to God in the name of Christ, because He has Himself, in His work, provided for the granting of our requests; and our author's definition, "all that He desires to be accomplished for the Father's glory and His own joy" includes every proper subject of His people's prayers, even if about personal needs and circumstances.

Looking fairly at the whole subject, the difficult point obviously is the absoluteness of the promise to prayer in Christ's name, all such prayer being granted. And the question naturally arises, What about the mass of requests presented in that name which are never granted? The reply is that those requests, though ostensibly in Christ's name, cannot have been truly so; Christ's name having been tacked on as a formula to prayers not inwrought by the Spirit in the heart and therefore not really in Christ's name, for the mere repetition of the form of the words is not really praying in the name of the Lord Jesus. There seems to be no other conclusion that can be drawn. If God's word tells us that prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus is granted, and prayers which we have made are not granted, then they cannot have been truly in His name. The "Christian Friend and Instructor" has endeavored to solve the difficulty by a theory that prayer in Christ's name can only be about a certain class of subjects, and these it proceeds to define, but the definition is so erroneous that it makes the "personal needs and circumstances" of Christ's people to be outside the circle of Christ's own interests!

But prayer in Christ's name is not the only case in regard to which the promise is unlimited. The following promises are as absolute and unlimited as that in question, viz.— "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 18:19). "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22). "If ye

abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). "If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God, and whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:21, 22). "If we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us; and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (1 John 5:14, 15).

Now if the absoluteness of the promise requires that the subjects be curtailed in one case it does so in all. But not in one of these cases is any such limit imposed by the Lord or His apostles. The word is, "anything that they shall ask"; "whatsoever ye shall ask"; "ye shall ask what ye will"; and so on. If the suggested limitation of subjects were intended, here certainly would be the place to expect it; but Scripture is silent on the point; and not only so, but the language which the Spirit of God employs is specifically broad and comprehensive. It is impossible to suppose that all these promises, as well as those to Christ's name, would have been left unguarded by the restrictions in question, if those restrictions were intended to exist. The limiting of the promise, therefore, in all or in any one of these cases, to a certain class of subjects, must be rejected as a mistaken explanation, and—however well intended—a human invention, and a misleading gloss upon Scripture.

Now it is quite true that there is a class of prayer which is above the level of personal needs and circumstances. Examples of this are the magnificent prayer of the church in Acts 4:24-30; the two prayers of the apostle Paul in Ephesians (first, in chap. 1:16-23, and secondly, in chap. 3:14-21). But that we have not Christ's name for prayer about personal needs and circumstances, as well as for the more exalted descriptions of prayer just referred to, is pure imagination, and not to be found in Scripture. ALL TRUE PRAYER NOW IS IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (John 16:23, 24). Doubtless there is a great deal of prayer colorably in the name of Christ, which is not genuinely so, and this is not transmuted into true prayer by adding at the end, as a formula of words, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Scripture admits that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought," but "he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints according to God" (Rom. 8:26, 27). The great requisite for prayer, therefore, is to have the mind of the Spirit about the matter in hand, and this can only be acquired by being morally near to the Lord, abiding in Him experimentally. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). Hence the humility, the self-distrust, submissiveness to the divine will, in which spirit only can true prayer be made; but whatever the Father recognizes as in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will undoubtedly be granted. THERE IS, HOWEVER, NO OTHER NAME IN WHICH TO PRAY.

"In my name" has an exclusive force with reference to prayer, as has been previously stated (page 75). But this limitation is of a totally different nature from that which we have been discussing. This limits prayer in Christ's name to all true prayer—all prayer which is according to God, whatever the subject. The other confines prayer in Christ's name to a certain class of subjects.

One or two points remain to be noticed. The article says— "By praying in His name, then, we understand appearing before the Father on His behalf... to pray for... all that He Himself desires to be accomplished... Praying then in His name is to intercede for His own interests, His own desires, objects and ends."

This is a complete inversion of the truth. We do not appear before the Father on Christ's behalf, but with His name on our behalf. Christ does not need anyone to intercede for Him! We need His intercession, and blessed be His name, we have it, for He ever liveth to make intercession for us (Rom. 8; Heb. 7). What an upsetting of divine order and fitness this teaching leads to, for it makes the saints intercessors for Christ, whereas Christ is Intercessor for them!

Again, the article says— "Coming now to what is found in John 16 as to prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, or in the name of the Son (as in chap. 14), it should be observed," etc., etc. Now suppose a Christian reading this when he has not his Bible at hand. What will he think? He will perhaps say to himself, "Prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, or in the name of the Son. What does it mean? I did not know that there was such a distinction!" Well, when he looks at his Bible he will find that the distinction is of the same class as that which we have already considered, namely, without Scripture basis—purely imaginary. Here are the two scriptures in question, and it will probably puzzle any one to discover the distinction referred to. "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (16:23, 24). "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it" (14:13, 14). Thus it will be seen, prayer in John 16 is stated as "in my name"; and prayer in John 14 is likewise "in my name." In chap. 14 the purpose is disclosed— "that the Father may be glorified in the Son." But prayer in John 14 is no more in the name of the Son than in John 16 And prayer in John 16 is just as much in the name of the Son as in John 14. It only remains to be added that the words "in my name," in the original Greek, are exactly the same in each case. So much for the scriptural accuracy of this teaching.

Now is all this a mere dispute about words? Had it been so these lines would not have been written. But an error in the things of God is never innocuous. A man may believe what he likes about a point in physical science, and it will have no bad effect. But moral or spiritual error cannot be imbibed without harm. In this case there is an attempt, probably all unconscious, to rob the children of God of a precious encouragement to prayer, and of spiritual power in making prayer.

Apart, however, from positive error, teaching of this sort is injurious, from the state of doubt and perplexity which it creates. How few who read the article in the "Christian Friend" will understand what is really meant? But how many will come away from its perusal, with a confused idea that there is something very abstruse about prayer, which they have never heard of before, and which they do not understand now? They have always believed that the Lord's name was given to them for their prayers. But they are told that that is not so. It only applies to half their prayers, perhaps only to a quarter, perhaps to still less. They must be "in a circle in which" they "have no needs," and are "lost, absorbed in the Father's counsels," before they can pray in the name of the Lord Jesus! At any rate, the question is so perplexing as to which of their prayers that blessed name avails for, and which not, that practically the power and effect of the promise are lost. The distinctions which the Holy Spirit makes in Scripture are deeply important—even the smallest. The distinctions of the human mind, foisted into the things of God, are confusing and detrimental.

"HITHERTO HAVE YE ASKED NOTHING IN MY NAME. ASK AND YE SHALL RECEIVE, THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL" (John 16:24).

[E. J. T.]

(continued)

Practical Remarks on Prayer, Prayer, Practical Remarks on: 8. Prayer in the Name of Christ (16:23-27)

"And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full... At that day ye shall ask in my name; and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God" (John 16:23-27). Has the reader ever noticed how a letter-knowledge of Scripture may sometimes hinder its spiritual apprehension? Perhaps it is thus with the expression, "In my name" —so familiar as a phrase, yet its power so slightly understood. The fact is that prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus is one of the special distinctions of the present day of grace. The Lord indicates this by the statement, "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name," and thus marks off our position in prayer from that of God's people in the past. Whether Abraham in Gen. 18, or Solomon, at the dedication of the temple, Daniel in Babylon, or Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:15)—each addressed God suitably according to the character, or the relationship, in which He was known. But the revelation of the divine nature was then only partial. Jesus, however, revealed the Father—yet, until the coming of the Holy Ghost, the disciples' comprehension of that revelation, of much that He taught, was obscure. In the 16th of John, however, the Lord is about to go away. He had already taught them to pray to God as their Father, but naming Him only by description, as "Our Father who art in heaven"; now, he announces a new thing, based on His ascension. They would approach the Father in His name; that is, not now One distantly described as "in heaven" (for He had not as yet shown them plainly of the Father, John 16:25), but One fully known as THE FATHER: even as John states, "I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13). Praying in His name involves these points—(1) Our title of access to the Father Himself. (2) That so approaching the Father we come in all the potency, all the value, of the name of the Lord Jesus. (3) That the Holy Spirit has come, and gives us, not only consciousness of our position as sons with the Father (Gal. 4:6), but spiritual capacity to use this new privilege—we have access through Christ, by the Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18). This, it will be seen, is a deeper thing than the verbal tacking on the Lord's name as a form at the end of a prayer. Delightful, gracious way, in which the Lord puts it! "I say not unto you that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loveth you." He, as it were, introduces us to the Father; and that in the tactful manner of one who would place us at ease in the atmosphere of the Father's love. Would that we realized more the immense power of our position with the Father, and the value of the name of Jesus in which to draw near! All this, it will be observed, depends upon the vast change implied in the words "because I go unto the Father" (John 14:12). Man in His person would be entering into a position in which man had never been before; and He labors to convey to their minds what would be its significance for them. So far, as to the privilege and power of His name given to us for our prayers. This is the positive side; but there is also a negative. There is what His name excludes, as well as what it includes. "Whatsoever" is the promise, but that is defined and limited by "in my name." As another has said: "'Whatsoever!' Were it alone, it would be boundless, and the Lord would thus have opened the door to all the desires of unbroken will among His people. But He adds, 'in my name.' This is His limit—the barrier He sets up."¹

Not only, however, do we fail to understand, and fail to use, our privilege of prayer in Christ's name, but some in trying to explain the matter have not only mystified it but have fallen into error, as witness the following—

"Coming now to what is found in John 16 as to prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, or in the name of the Son (as in chap. 14), it should be first observed that our access to our God and Father is always and only through Christ. As Paul writes, 'For through Him, we both (Jew and Gentile) have access by one Spirit unto the Father.' We cannot come in any other way. But coming thus 'through Him' before God the question is at once met, What is praying in His name? It could not be using His name as a plea, or entreating to be heard for His sake, because the Lord says, without any limitation whatever, 'Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.' By praying in His name, then, we understand appearing before the Father on His behalf, and as warranted to be there by Him, so that we are there with all the Son's claim upon the Father's heart, and taken up in the power of the Holy Ghost to utter and pray for, in communion with His own heart, all that He Himself desires to be accomplished for the Father's glory and His own joy. Praying, then, in His name is to intercede for His own interests, His own desires, objects and ends. If this be so, this character of prayer has no reference to our own personal needs or circumstances; indeed, it could not. And let it not be forgotten that there is a circle in which we have no needs, because we are lost, absorbed in the Father's counsels for the glory of His beloved Son. At the same time we have full liberty to come at all times, through our blessed Lord, into the presence of God, and to tell out everything that burdens our hearts (Phil. 4:6, 7); only this is not praying 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.'"²

There is here either truth, or error, and on such a matter there ought to be no doubt. According to this writer, the Christian has the name of Christ for some only of his prayers; for the rest, that blessed Name is not available. This is of practical importance, for if accepted, it must hamper the believer in the holy exercise of prayer, and greatly restrict the power as well as the liberty and joy of his communion with God. If there be such a distinction, Scripture might be expected to express it with unmistakable plainness; but in Scripture, it may be searched for in vain. Of course one cannot prove the negative: the duty of proof rests with those who assert a new doctrine. No positive scripture, however, is cited, as it surely would have been, if there had been one to cite.

That prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is a characteristic feature of Christianity has already been shown. The Lord intimates this, when, referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit, He says, "And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:23, 24).

He had previously instructed His disciples, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him" (Matt. 7:7-11)?

But this, it will be observed, is based upon the benevolent character of God, not showing how divine beneficence could be extended to evil men, without a compromise of divine righteousness. That is not shown, because the work had not yet been accomplished, on the basis of which only, could God forbear with men, much less bless them, forgive their sins, or answer their prayers. God's grace to man was as yet administered on the ground of the foreseen sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 3:25). But we are in the period which Christ referred to as "that day" (John 14:12; 16:23). It was then future; but now the great work of atonement has been done, and the position is made clear. Christ is the propitiation for sins that are past through the forbearance of God, as well as the basis for all blessing by God towards sinners at any time. This now is no longer mysterious, but open and manifest. God's attributes are reconciled in the cross; His righteousness in bestowing blessing is declared; and a sequence of this is that prayer is now in the name of Christ. It could not be so before, for the Lord was in humiliation: He had emptied Himself, and had not where to lay His head. Observe then that the name given us in which to present our prayers is that of Jesus glorified at the Father's right hand; not the name as despised on earth, but as acclaimed in heaven. And what a name of power it is! Every knee in heaven and on earth shall bow at the name of Jesus—infernal beings also (Phil. 2:10). And in that name—so glorious, so beloved—we are privileged to approach the Father.

Now in ver. 12 of John 14 the Lord speaks of a certain result of His going to the Father. "Greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto my Father." The next verse is joined to this by the conjunction "and." "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that will I do." It will be seen then that prayer in His name is a consequence of the position which He was about to take at the Father's right hand. It is a broad dispensational privilege. So far from being confined to some only of our prayers, His name, according to the showing of Scripture, avails for all. At least, we find that when the Lord announced the new privilege, He did not attach to it any such restriction as that laid down by the article in "The Christian Friend"; and not only is there a conspicuous absence of the limitation, but the Lord's words in the announcement are really inconsistent with it. Thus He says, "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

[E. J. T.]

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