

PRAYER PATHS

EVERY HOME FOR CHRIST - OCTOBER 18TH, 2014 – GOD REALLY HEARS - STEPHEN VENABLE

I. PERSEVERANCE IN PRAYER

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints... Ephesians 6:18

A. The New Testament Call to Persistent Prayer

1. The New Testament is filled with many examples of prayer and much teaching on prayer. We are told our prayers must be constant, fervent, sober, and filled with faith (1 Thess 5:16, 1 Pet 4:7, Mk 11:24).
2. In addition to these, one of the most important qualities of biblical prayer is *persistence*. Jesus had a particular emphasis on this theme in His teaching (*cf.* Luke 11:1-13, 18:1-8). We must understand how we can persevere in prayer, especially when we encounter delay.

B. Revelation that Sustains Our Hearts

1. One of the sources is to renew our confidence that *God actually hears our cry*. When prayer is not answered the accusation is that God does not care and that our voice is not even reaching Him.
“But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.” (Luke 1:13, ESV)
2. We may not understand the reasons for delay, but when we are assured that God does actually hear our prayers then we are encouraged to continue seeking Him and our faith is strengthened that it will yield a response according to God’s timing and plan.

II. OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

“But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly...In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.” (Matthew 6:6–9, NKJV)

A. A Revelation of the Heavenly Temple

“The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD’S throne is in heaven....” Psalm 11:4

1. God’s Dwelling Place

God is enthroned in a very specific place within the third or highest heaven (2 Cor 12:2) called *the Heavenly Temple*. This holy sanctuary (Ps 28:2) is where the unceasing worship of heaven transpires and can also be referred to as God’s holy habitation (Is 63:15) or His upper chambers (Ps 104:3).

2. *Primary Texts:* Psalm 5:7, 11:4, 18:6, 27:4, 29:1-11, 65:4, 93:1-5, 96:6, 138:2; Jonah 2:2-7; Habakkuk 2:20; Micah 1:2-4; Isaiah 6:1-7, 63:15; Zechariah 2:13; Psalm 28:2; 102:19, 150:2; Jeremiah 25:30; Revelation 3:11-12, 4:1-11, 7:13-16, 11:19, 15:5-8, 16:1, 17-8; Psalm 104:1-4; Amos 9:5-6; Acts 7:44, 48; Hebrews 8:1-2, 9:11

B. The Prayers of Heaven

1. The Harp and the Bowl

- a. A revelation of the Heavenly Temple explains why worship and prayer must always be inextricably bound together.

⁸ Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying... Revelation 5:8

- b. Several chapters later a more detailed picture of this reality is found:

Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. ⁴ And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. Revelation 8:3-5

2. The Prayers of the Saints

- a. It is difficult to exaggerate the magnificence of what emerges upon careful examination of this theme. In both Revelation 5 and 8, the intercession that fills the Heavenly Temple originates *from the saints*.
 - b. Prayer and worship are inseparable in the Sanctuary of God, but it is the weak groans, tears, and petitions uttered on the earth that accompanies the angelic worship. There is no indication biblically that the privilege of intercession is bestowed upon any creature besides the ones made in the image of God.¹
 - c. Prayer is a human endeavor, birthed in the Divine heart. As the angelic host stand before the throne in festal array (Heb 12:22), stretching off in the distance row after row, not one dares to break rank and approach the throne in order to ask for something.
 - d. Ancient as the mountains and without sin, yet they do not request anything of the One upon whom they gaze. And we who are as fleeting as the flowers of the field and the mist of the morning, so broken and fractured by sin, have longings whispered as we go to and fro throughout our day carried into His very presence for His consideration. *God actually considers our prayers*.
 - e. For while the angels themselves do not pray, some of them are responsible for presenting our intercession before Him, as the scenes from Revelation indicate. Although our prayers leave our mouths and seem to vanish into the air, in truth they find a *physical, sacramental* representation in the Heavenly Temple in the form of incense.²
3. The Incense of Prayer
- a. All major translations insert the word “with” in Revelation 8:3-4: “He was given much incense that he should offer it ‘with’ the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, ‘with’ the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand.”
 - b. Although it is not in the original Greek text, they do this because the idea that incense *is* the prayers of the saints seems difficult to digest conceptually. This, however, is not the best translation, as renowned Greek scholar Robert Mounce clarifies:
*The clause has been variously understood, but the major options are two. Either the incense is mingled with the prayers of the saints or the incense is the prayers. The majority of commentators and English translations favor the former alternative. The RSV translates, “and [the angel] was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints ... and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints.” It is preferable, however, to follow the second option, which is to take the dative case in vv. 3 and 4 (translated by the preposition “with”) as equivalent to the Hebrew *le* of definition and to translate, “he was given much incense to offer, consisting of the prayers of all the saints.” This interpretation harmonizes with 5:8, where the bowls of incense are definitely identified with the prayers of the saints.*³
 - c. Doesn’t God actually know what we say to Him? Of course He does, but if the LORD desires a tangible representation of the cries of our hearts, who are we to argue with Him?
4. A Revelation of Prayer
- a. It is of tremendous significance in the ministry of corporate and personal prayer to realize that our words affect the physical environment of the most important place - the most beautiful place – in the universe.
 - b. Our prayer causes *real smoke* to rise “before God” as He sits on His throne. We may not understand how or when He responds, but there could not be a more concrete assurance that our voice is truly heard in God’s dwelling place. Our cry reaches Him in the heights of the heavens where He is adored night and day.
 - c. If we actually believed this it would change everything. Oh for a revelation of the privilege and power of prayer!

¹ In I Enoch 15 a fallen angel is rebuked for not making intercession, which would imply that angels are supposed to do that ideally. However there is reasonable cause to see the section as a symbolic polemic against the priests in Jerusalem, in which case the author would actually be launching criticism against a human figure. Either way, this still does not establish the idea *biblically*, which is the key issue. There is also biblical basis for angelic figures bringing an accusation against someone in the divine council of the second heavens but this is very different than the ministry of intercession or petition.

² In the Protestant Church there is little room for sacramental theology, but it is a very biblical concept. Paul’s handkerchiefs healed people, as did Peter’s shadow, and there are trees with leaves that are for the healing of the nations.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The NIC on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 174.