

# *Petitionary Prayer and the Character of God*

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This is admittedly a one-sided piece. It does not tell the whole story nor does it present a balanced picture. It does not solve the wrenching pastoral questions raised by the parents who unsuccessfully pray for their child's healing. There is no solution here for finally discerning the divine will in automobile wrecks or plane crashes or starving Ethiopian babies, no theological proposal as to why justice in the world is so scarce and peace so elusive. In fact, all these problems are intensified by the thesis offered—that petitionary prayer is essentially calling God to account for divine promises made.

That may appear a bit irreverent. Is the clay to talk back to the potter? Who has the right to put God on the spot? Does not even Jesus silence his own questions about why things have to happen the way they do with an acquiescence ("Nevertheless, thy will be done")? Isn't it obvious that human sin, directly or indirectly, is to be blamed for tragedies and injustice? Why call God to account?

Let me put the case this way. The Bible repeatedly orients prayer to the character of God. Believers are taught to pray not because they need it badly or because of what it will do for them. They are rather invited to pray because God is the kind of God who listens, a "heavenly Father" who is more than ready to give good gifts to the family. Take two of Luke's parables. The image of the unfriendly neighbor immediately follows both the request of a disciple for instruction as to how to pray and the model prayer Jesus gave (Luke 11:1-13). The parable proper is in the form of a question, actually a rather ludicrous question. "Which of you will go to your neighbor at midnight and ask to borrow provisions for an unexpected guest and be turned down?" In the mid-eastern culture with the high value placed on hospitality, the anticipated answer is, "None of us. We don't have neighbors like that." But Jesus continues, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his *anaideia* he will rise and give him whatever he needs." Kenneth E. Bailey (with others) is right in arguing that the Greek word *anaideia*, translated by the RSV as "importunity," should be given its other meaning "shamelessness." There is nothing in the parable to suggest that the one who had the unexpected guest to arrive pestered his neighbor into providing bread. It is more likely that the neighbor responded because he feared the shame that would surround his refusal. Word would circulate throughout the community that for no serious reason at all he had denied the request for hospitality. It was not worth facing the reproaches of fellow citizens, and so he risked waking the children to get the three loaves.<sup>1</sup>

God then is contrasted with the unfriendly neighbor. If the unfriendly

neighbor who is prone to deny requests for help will nevertheless give help to avoid shame, how much more will God respond to the appeals of believers? God can be trusted. God's integrity will not be violated. Ask, knock, seek; for God can be counted on to give good gifts. Petitionary prayer is rooted in the character of God.

Another Lukan parable making the same point is the episode of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). In telling and re-telling the story the early church obviously focused sometimes on the persistent widow and sometimes on the ruthless judge. Luke begins by noting that Jesus told the parable "to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." The widow, though a powerless victim of manipulation in a man's world, becomes a model to the church in her perseverance. She refuses to take "No" for an answer and badgers the judge into granting her request. The line the judge speaks has a physical (and somewhat humorous) quality to it. It might be paraphrased, ". . . or she will leave me black and blue by her persistence."

On other occasions, however, the church in telling the story concentrated on the figure of the unjust judge. Like the unfriendly neighbor, he becomes a contrasting type for God. If a cold-blooded character like this judge eventually gives in to the persistence of the widow, how much more will God listen to the prayers of the people? God won't turn a deaf ear. "And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily."

Both parables make the case for petitionary prayer by stressing the character of God. The figures of the begrudging, unfriendly neighbor and the heartless, unscrupulous judge by their unsavory qualities call attention to the opposite attributes of God—one to be trusted, one responsive to requests, one who sees that justice is carried out. The vivid picture of the persistent widow suggests that pressing for warranted justice is not only appropriate but exemplary.

This leads to a second point to be made in the case for petitionary prayer as calling God to account. In the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-10) Jesus taught the disciples to ask God to do something that God had promised would be done—to hallow the divine name, to bring in the divine reign, to actualize the divine will in human history. They are not injunctions to the disciples to refrain from cursing, to get socially involved, and to be good the way the angels in heaven are good. Instead, they plaintively urge God not to hold back. The rule of peace and justice, repeatedly promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, is obviously delayed, and according to the prayer God is petitioned to delay no longer. One even senses an urgency in the petitions. "How long, O Lord, how long?" Put in the categories of the New Testament, the church is taught to pray for the second advent, for the time when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of the Lord and of the Messiah. Unfortunately, to cover liberalism's embarrassment with the apocalyptic character of Jesus' teaching the petitions have often been reduced to three more moral exhortations to do right.

The three petitions are hardly timid. While put politely in the third person imperative appropriate to prayer (literally, "Let your name be hallowed; let your kingdom come; let your will be done"), they nevertheless urge God to

get on with the stated plans and intentions for creation. Underneath lie an impatience and restlessness with the way things are going in the world. Presumably those who utter the requests are troubled by the contradictions and inconsistencies of human experience, the gaps between what has been promised and what exists. They are aware of their own part in creating the problem and know their own impotence in making a difference. They are even invited to ask God not to put them to the test. Implicit is the awareness that those who pray cannot themselves usher in the promised era. Only God can finally precipitate the divine reign, and God is petitioned to do so.

What sort of prayers do people pray when they take seriously the integrity and character of God? Audacious prayers that even contend with God. Faced on the one hand with the pain and suffering of human experience and on the other hand with the divine promises, those who pray can hardly resort to a pious passivity that merely accepts things the way they are. Faith compels them to press God as to why God does not do what only God can do. One thinks of Abraham bargaining for Sodom, or Job begging God to appear and give account for what has happened, or the nameless saints who penned the psalms of lament. They did not confuse timidity with reverence.

Perhaps the clearest occasion of audacious petitioning comes in Exodus 32:7-14. Moses is on the mountain with God when they discover that the people of Israel in their anxiety over Moses' long absence have committed a grievous sin. They have persuaded Aaron to fashion a golden calf and are worshipping it. God is furious. The dialog with Moses (paraphrased) goes something like this:

- God: Go down, Moses; *your* people whom *you* brought of the land of Egypt have made themselves a golden calf and have worshipped and sacrificed to it. Leave me alone! Don't bother me with such stubborn people! My wrath shall burn against them and devour them!
- Moses: *My* people whom *I* brought out of Egypt? What do you mean? I was a contented shepherd in Midian minding my own business when *you* made that bush to burn. It was *you* who saw the affliction of the people in Egypt and sent me there. Don't think you can bail out now and leave me holding the bag. These are *your* people. *You* delivered them from Pharaoh's hand, and in grand style, too. Are you now going to give the Egyptians the last laugh as they chuckle at the cruel way you will let the Israelites die in the wilderness of Sinai? You'll do nothing but make yourself a laughing-stock. Have you forgotten Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and all the promises you made to them about their descendents being like the stars of the heavens? What about the land you swore to give them as their heritage forever?

The text (unparaphrased) poignantly reads, "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people" (32:14).

There are three observations to make about petitionary prayer based on this dialog between God and Moses, anthropomorphic as it is. First, there is

nothing wrong with contending with God, even when logic suggests there is not much of a case to be argued. The people of Israel are more Moses' people than he cares to admit. Thus in their behalf he challenges God's intent to destroy them. Moses has the weaker side in the debate. He is contending for people who have thoroughly failed their responsibility in the covenant relationship. There are all sorts of reasons why God should wipe them out. Moses' argument, however, is not tied to the worthiness of those for whom he intercedes.

Second, Moses appeals to the divine promises. Though the people have been totally irresponsible, he counts on one thing—that God keeps faith with declared commitments. Moses does not attempt to excuse or mitigate Israel's sin. He does not seek to convince God that the Israelites, if given another chance, will do better. He simply recalls the pledges God has made to the patriarchs. It is not that Moses is arrogant and has presumed himself equal with God. He is simply taking seriously the divine promises. His persistence suggests that contending with God is not a sign of weak faith, but of strong faith. As Ted Jennings in a provocative book on prayer has commented, "It is because and only because we believe God's promises that the agony of our neighbor is not a matter of indifference to us."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in Moses' appeal the divine commitments set a boundary for appropriate petitions. He does not ask for what God has not promised. He might have argued for special blessings for himself as the lone Israelite who had not bowed the knee to the golden calf, blessings God seems ready to grant (Exod. 32:10). The promises, however, had not been made to him as an individual but to the community. Petitionary prayer is not like stroking the magic lamp to get whatever one wishes from the obedient genie. "Prayer is not a strategem for getting what we want. It is simply a holding of God to his promises in which we are repeatedly confronted with the pain and loss that we feel when we permit ourselves to yearn for a kingdom that has not yet come."<sup>3</sup>

Of course petitioners, in claiming God's promise either for themselves or for others, stay open to the particular ways in which the promise may be fulfilled and the prayer answered. One thinks of Paul's persistent petition that "the thorn in the flesh" be removed (II Cor. 12:7-10). His claim on the gracious character of God led to an answer more profound than he could have anticipated.

Thinking of petitionary prayer as a calling God to account for promises made casts a different light on the complicated problem of unanswered prayer. The early church continually oriented itself to the fundamental promise that God would consummate the divine reign, that Jesus would return. It regularly prayed, "Our Lord, come!" (I Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20). The delay of the Parousia perplexed various communities of faith and forced a reinterpretation of Christian life and mission. Today the church offers the same prayer, but the fact of the continued delay is hardly a bother. Jennings puts the issue sharply:

That we have lost all sense of perspective in this matter is evident from the way in which "the problem of unanswered prayer" is frequently raised. To put it simply, we balk if we don't get our way about the healing of a relative or the growth of our congregation, but shrug off the "delay" of the Parousia. Nothing could better show how utterly ridiculous we

have become. We swallow elephants whole and gag on gnats. *No matter what specific requests we make, the one prayer we always pray—"Your kingdom come—is the one unanswered prayer.* If this petition were answered, we would no longer feel the brokenness and despair which is our regular lot and which, in particular cases and situations, raises "the problem of unanswered prayer"<sup>4</sup> (*Italics mine*).

When facing the agonizing questions of "Why?" from those in the midst of tragedy, perhaps the role of the pastor is not to provide answers for God or to suggest that God had nothing to do with what happened, but to share the anger of the perplexed in calling God to account. In doing so, one joins with the whole church in pleading for God's promised consummation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), pp. 125-133.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Life as Worship: Prayer and Praise in Jesus' Name* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.