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CHARIOTS OF FIRE

by John Hoad

WHAT JOHN SAW IN HEAVEN

John, exiled to Patmos for preaching God's Word and bearing his testimony to Jesus, was given a panoramic vision of heaven, through a door opened in the skies. He saw a central throne and other thrones surrounding it; an emerald rainbow; lightning flashes and torches of fire; a sea,

smooth as glass, like a sheet of ice; and there were the twenty-four elders, and the four strange living creatures, and the One Whose appearance was like a gleam of jasper and cornelian, and the Lamb, in the very middle, with the marks of slaughter upon Him. Let us pinpoint one detail on this vast canvas: John saw that each elder had a harp, and that they held bowls in their hands (Rev. 5. 8). Look more closely at those bowls. John said that they were made of gold, and from them came the smoke of incense, the sweet smelling smoke of some gum, or spice, burning.

To speak about heaven – the place of God’s visibly manifest presence and government – a man must speak in symbols, in physical metaphors suggesting spiritual truths. John did this; and at this point, as elsewhere, he annotated his picture and explained the symbol. The golden bowls full of incense, he said, are *the prayers of God’s people*. If symbolic representations help you, dwell long on that picture; but if not, still impress vividly upon your mind and memory this truth: that prayer is important enough to be mentioned in such a description of God’s presence and activity. John saw the prayers of God’s people visibly represented in heaven, and what John saw was a revelation given him by Jesus Christ, Who had received it from God Himself.

There can only be one conclusion (a conclusion urged upon us elsewhere throughout Scripture): God is interested in our prayers. God wants us to pray; indeed, requires our prayers. Our prayers enter the ears of the sovereign Creator of this

universe. They mingle with and are offered up with the worship and service of God’s angelic ministrants themselves, and their presentation to God boomerangs again to earth, releasing God’s judgements in history (Rev. 8. 3-5).

Let us value prayer, then.

BROTHER LAWRENCE’S CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS.

Some Christian traditions have stressed the value of a Quiet Time, a daily period set apart for prayer and for meditation upon the Scriptures. They are taught to set their days within a definite framework, or pattern, of devotion to God and instruction from His Word.

This is a good thing; but before we can rightly assess and practise it, we need to listen to one who didn’t favour set times of prayer: Nicolas Herman, better known as Brother Lawrence-of-the-Resurrection, a seventeenth century laybrother of the Discalced Carmelites of Paris.

In his devotional classic, “The Practice of the Presence of God”,¹ Brother Lawrence makes such statements as these: “That he had never been able to pray according to pattern, as some do.” “That he was more united with God during his ordinary activities than in religious exercises.” “That it was a great delusion to imagine that prayer-time should be different from any other.” “To be with God it is not necessary to be always in church. We may make a chapel of our heart whereto to escape from time to time to talk with Him quietly, humbly and lovingly.”

Of different stages in the life of grace, he says: “I have by no means followed these stages; on the contrary, I found from the first that they discouraged me, I know not why.” He had obviously studied the life of prayer, for he remarks on “having found different ways of attaining to God and different practices of the spiritual life in many different books.” But on all this he comments: “I came to the conclusion that they would serve to hinder rather than to help me in my quest, which was for nothing else but a way of becoming wholly God’s.”

And so he arrives at the remarkable position: “I have given up all devotions and pieties which are not of obligation, and instead try to keep myself always in God’s holy presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon Him.” And he warns: “That many souls get stuck among systems and particular devotions and neglect that love which is their real end. This can be seen at once in their works, and is the reason why we see so little solid virtue.”

Qualify, as we must, Brother Lawrence’s strictures on devotional practices, yet there is here a touchstone for all praying and living that may not be ignored. Martin Luther spoke scathingly of those who “patter and chatter the Psalter, as geese noisily eat their straw,”² but know nothing of real prayer. And in 1519, expounding the Lord’s Prayer for ordinary laymen, he went to the heart of the matter, writing: “All teachers of Scripture conclude that the essence and the nature of prayer are nothing else than the raising of the soul or heart to God. But if the nature

and the art of prayer consist in the raising of the heart, it follows that everything which is not a lifting up of the heart is not prayer. Therefore singing, speaking, and piping, when not accompanied by the rising of the heart to God, are prayers as much as the scarecrows in the garden are men. The essence is not there, but only the appearance and the name.”³ Let us remember, then, that prayer means placing ourselves in the presence of God.

DOSAGE: THRICE DAILY

Professor Joachim Jeremias in his W. F. Lofthouse Lecture on ‘Daily Prayer in the Life of our Lord and of the Early Church’ adduced evidence to show that Palestinian Judaism in the time of Jesus had developed a definite pattern of thrice daily prayers (at rising, at the evening sacrifice, at bedtime). It is within this devotional discipline that Jesus and the Early Church learnt to pray, even while they broke through the customs of their day, both in respect of the framework of the prayer life and of its content.

Psalms 55. 17 speaks of prayer in the “evening and morning and at noon”. Daniel knelt three times a day before his windows open towards Jerusalem (6. 10) and one of his prayer periods was the time of the evening sacrifice (9. 21). We read of Jesus using, and extending, morning and evening prayer times (Mark 1. 35; 6. 46-47; Luke 6. 12). In Acts 3. 1 we are told of Peter and John going to the temple at the ninth hour (3 p.m.), the evening hour of prayer. Jesus

and the Apostles observed, as a regular practice, the weekly worship of the synagogue (Luke 4. 16; Acts 13. 14) as well as the major festivals, such as the Passover and Pentecost (Mark 14. 12; Acts 2. 1, 20. 16). It is possible that the set times of prayer within the life of his monastery were of more help to Brother Lawrence than he realized. Certainly our Lord was born and bred among a praying people, and the new departures in prayer that characterized His teaching and practice, and that of the Early Church, as later of the Protestant Reformers, sprung out of a disciplined devotional life, a definite framework of daily, weekly and annual times of prayer. There is nothing sacrosanct about prayer thrice daily, but there is something sensible in achieving order and discipline in our devotions.

We need, therefore, a system and at the same time a spontaneity and liberty and intimacy in our praying.

THITHER THE TRIBES REPAIR

It is a pity that all too often some Christians, at the mention of prayer, think chiefly of a Christian's solitary prayers or perhaps of a prayer meeting, and tend to look upon church services more as gatherings for the exposition of God's Word, or as a means of publicly testifying to their Christian allegiance.

This is an unbiblical attitude. The psalmists considered the house of God to be the place of their regular praise and prayer (e.g., Ps. 84. 2;

111. 1; 122. 1). It was the regular practice of Jesus to attend synagogue worship, and He re-affirmed Jeremiah's description of the temple as a "house of prayer" (Mark 11. 17), even while He looked forward to the day when worship of God would no longer be confined to the historic sites of Jerusalem and Gerizim (John 4. 21). Praise and prayer mingled with instruction and the breaking of bread in the congregational practice of the Early Church (Acts 2. 42, 46; Col. 3. 15, 16). Almost all of the Epistles of the New Testament are apostolic missives addressed to Christian assemblies. They are community documents, not private letters.

We must recapture this community sense in our practice of the presence of God. We need to establish ourselves in the habit of participating with our Christian community in its appointed hours of praise, fellowship, instruction, and sacramental observance. And we must look for God in these hours; must join in them with the definite and oft re-affirmed intent of placing ourselves before God as we sing, pray, listen, and eat and drink together.

I wish someone had impressed this advice on me ten years ago. How often, as a student, did I treat college chapel devotions as something secondary to my private prayers! As if God were more honoured by my private audiences than by my sharing with my brethren in calling Him, "*Our* Father".

Let us not miss church meetings, then, but make the most of realizing God's presence in them. Commune with Him in the community of His people.

WHEN YOU LIE DOWN, AND WHEN YOU RISE

Of course, there should be no dichotomy between public and private praying. "In fellowship, alone," says Charles Wesley in a hymn, "To God with faith draw near." And the hymn mentions prayer in "His temple", in "every house", and in "every heart". Jesus valued and sought companionship in prayer (as in Gethsemane). Jesus also urged withdrawal into a room by oneself, with the door shut, for communion in secret with God (Matt. 6. 6). To our corporate practice of prayer we shall add, therefore, a pattern of private devotions. There is no law of the Medes and Persians in the pursuit of such a pattern. But Scripture enjoins upon us "an ordered and sober life, given to prayer" (I Peter 4. 7) and the discipline of ordering our life must be an accepted part of our discipleship.⁴

To this pattern of prayer on awakening and on retiring, and at meals, we shall want to add, following our Master, both brief utterances of prayer, freely offered outside of prescribed hours, and longer periods of communion and intercession (perhaps with a prayer list) – as need arises, or as one's spirit impels, or as habit directs, or according to a timetable, if the former are not operating! (Cp. Luke 10. 21; 6. 12; 9. 28.)

It is a good thing to stimulate and inform the prayer life by reading or re-reading a book on prayer from time to time, and by reading of those for whom prayer has become as breathing and eating and thinking. It is necessary, too, for each of us

to go our own way, to experiment, to dig deep where the divining rod of our individual "attrait" or "bent" tells us that the water of life is to be found by us. Church and world need more prayer pioneers. There is even such a thing as a "vocation" of prayer.

WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY –

As it is surprisingly easy to oscillate from attempts to observe a long "Quiet Time" to the neglect of prayer altogether, it is perhaps best to establish a simple pattern of daily prayer and Bible reading, and to build on this. Establish a minimum but don't be satisfied with the minimum. The riches of Christ will not be appropriated by triflers. Scripture calls us to give ourselves wholly to prayer (Ephes. 6. 18); to keep on with it and never lose heart (Luke 18. 1); and examples are set before us of those who, like Epaphras (Col. 4. 12), prayed hard for others. The prayer remains valid: "Lord, teach us to pray." And advance in prayer will mean appropriating more fully our Lord's reply to that request – namely, the Lord's Prayer. In the Catholic tradition there is a well-mapped path for such advance. What is not so well known is that there is also a definite Protestant tradition of spiritual growth. To understand it we need to understand what prayer is, if it is to be prayer at all.

Prayer is the vocalizing of faith. According to the Lord's Prayer, it is trust in God as Father expressing its desire and willingness to participate in the coming of God's rule

on earth and petitioning God's enabling of this (in the gift of life, forgiveness, and protection from evil). Prayer is man's word to God as evoked by God's Word to man. In keeping with this the Protestant tradition gives the Bible a large place in the devotional life. For the children of the Reformation, the practice of the presence of God is not the rubbing of an Aladdin's lamp of emotion to whip up a genie of sensation. Nor is it "positive thinking". Nor is it a "spiritual exercise" for the achievement of higher "states of prayer". It is, rather, a wrestling before God with His revealing and redeeming Word that this may become part and parcel of our lives. It is to share in the life of Christ as He moves from God manwards and from man Godwards. This movement is the story of the Old and New Testaments, and to share in it we must first enter into this story until God's Word speaks to us through it and evokes our word of praise, penitence, and petition (our utterance of the Lord's Prayer) in response.

Jesus is both "our praying Pattern" (to use Charles Wesley's phrase) and our Mediator and Advocate. "He, Jesus Christ, is properly and really the One who prays. But we belong to Him and are therefore empowered, invited and summoned to pray to Him after and with Him, not at all in respect of our own ability and permission, but just in that unity of the 'we' who are referred to in the Lord's Prayer and at whose head He has placed Himself."⁵

Professor Jeremias brings this out in another way in showing that the

Lord's Prayer with its invocation of God as "Abba" ("a homely family-word, the tender address of the babe to its father") marks a new departure in praying. Only the Messiah dare address God so – the Messiah and those who, by His revelation and redemption, are given "a share in His position as the only begotten."

Luther expounded this in his Commentary on Galatians (Gal. 4. 6), when he said of the cry, Abba, "Ah Father": "This but a little word, and yet notwithstanding it comprehendeth all things. The mouth speaketh not, but the affection of the heart speaketh after this manner. Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side, and seem to be forsaken and utterly cast away from thy presence, yet am I thy child, and thou art my Father for Christ's sake: I am beloved because of the Beloved. Wherefore this little word, Father, conceived effectually in the heart, passeth all the eloquence of Demosthenes, Cicero, and of the most eloquent Rhetoricians that ever were in the world. This matter is not expressed with words, but with groanings, which groanings cannot be uttered with any words or eloquence, for no tongue can express them."⁶ Christian prayer cannot be reduced to a mechanism or a yoga. It has a framework, and method in prayer (even as this affects the body) must not be despised, but its characteristic mark is the liberty of the children of God. To advance in Christian prayer is to advance in saying the Lord's Prayer, as its terms are illustrated in the Bible – for Christian prayer is simply the repeated, intelligent, disciplined, believing, exhilar-

ating attempt "to conceive effectually in the heart" and to articulate in our lives a perfect "Abba, Father, Thy Kingdom come."

VII. CHARIOTS OF FIRE

Elisha praying at Dothan for his servant to see the unseen world of God's forces and obtaining for his servant extra-sensory perception into extra-terrestrial reality – Elisha stands there in true succession to his master, Elijah, whom James took as an example of the truth that "the activated prayer of a man in a right relationship to God and to his fellow men can do much." (Jas. 5. 16.)

That old prayer mantle is lying around unused in many a Christian's wardrobe, except for certain special occasions. Let us take it out, and wear it, and be wrapped in its spirit In a world of nuclear powers we

need to be reminded that they that be for God and good and healing and life are more than they that be for evil, disease, destruction. We need more glimpses, more constant vision, of the chariots of fire.

May those chariots of fire – symbols of God's power and purifying presence – "swing low" in our day to quicken our praying into a flame. A story from the "Sayings" of the Desert Fathers aptly sums up our theme.

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said: "Abba, as far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a little fasting, and prayer, and meditation, and quiet; and as far as I can I try to cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. What else should I do?" Then the old man rose, and spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles; and he said: "If you will, you could become a living flame."⁷

NOTES

(1.) The translation used is that of D. Attwater. – (2.) Exposition of John 16. 23 (WA XLVI 77). Quoted from E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, no. 3480. – (3.) The Lord's Prayer (WA II. 85); Plass no. 3466. – (4.) Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III. 4, ET, p. 113: "Is there also an obligation with regard to definite times and hours of prayer? We might well believe so in view of the general human weakness which does not do at all easily what it does not do to rule . . . Common prayer forms as essential an element in divine service

as the proclamation and the hearing of God's Word". He goes on to commend "the pious custom of morning and evening prayer" with its "solid basis in what is on the biblical view of things the meaningful alternation of light and darkness." He links "grace at meals" with the expression of human need and divine help "in the most vital sphere of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer." – (5.) *ibid.* p. 94. – (6.) Middleton's translation. – (7.) To be found in Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* and in *Western Asceticism* (Library of Christian Classics) p. 142.