

Robert Vannoy, Lord's Prayer, Message #2

“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

Those of you who have very good memories may recall that about a year and a half ago or maybe longer I began a series in chapel. I intended this to be a series on the Lord's Prayer, taking each of the petitions in order and I've given two messages in that series up to this point, from Matthew 6 verses 9-13 where we read: “after this manner therefore pray ye: our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

If you recall in the first message of the two, I said that I thought there was great significance in reflecting on the content of the Lord's Prayer in connection with instruction for us in our manner of praying. Jesus says, “after this manner pray ye” and gave this prayer on two occasions to his disciples. He certainly intended that there should be something in this prayer that would guide them in the way in which they should pray. Not necessarily that they should always use these precise words, but certainly in the structure and order and content of the prayer there are things which the Lord intended his disciples to learn from.

When you look at the prayer the structure is quite clear. There are three petitions that relate to God, first of all: his name, his kingdom and his will. And then three petitions that relate to concerns of ours: our daily bread, forgiveness of sin, and deliverance from evil.

I'd like to center your attention on the third petition that is found in the tenth verse the latter part of the verse: “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We may ask initially what are we praying for when we utter that petition. I think that in connection with that, two questions come to mind with the wording of that petition. First of all, what is meant by will? When we say, “thy will be done,” what is meant by will? Is this God's decretive will? That is, the will of God's purpose, the will of God's decree. Or is this

God's preceptive will? That is, the will of God's command or precepts. I think we have to make a distinction between the will of God in reference to those two aspects of his will. To phrase it differently: is this God's secret will, or is this God's revealed will? The decretive will of God is largely hidden. The secret will relates to God's purposes. It is not so much as what we are to do for God but what God has determined to do for us. God's decretive will is his will of purpose, of plan--his hidden will. Whereas the preceptive will is something that is not hidden from us, the revealed will is made known to us in the gospels and in the scriptures. It is the will of God for our lives as we order our lives according to his plans. God's decretive will is always accomplished while his preceptive will is often disobeyed.

Now when you reflect on that in connection with this petition where the request is, "thy will be done on earth." If the prayer refers to God's decretive will then we pray that we patiently receive all that God brings to pass in our experience, that we be receptive to his purposes. Basically then the request or petition is one of receptivity. That we be willing to accept God's will, his purposes. If it refers to the preceptive will of God, his revealed will, then we are praying that we be obedient to God's commands, "thy will be done" in the sense of obedience. Now it seems to me that perhaps you can't draw a sharp line and say that this petition belongs to one or the other of these two aspects of God's will. The emphasis is more on the preceptive will of God particularly because of the last phrase in the petition: "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." Now I think the reason I say that will become clearer as we go along.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism which some of you may be familiar with devotes a whole section of the catechism to the Lord's Prayer as it does also to the Ten Commandments. It goes down through the Lord's Prayer petition by petition and asks the question: what is the intent of this or that petition when it discusses this petition. The conclusion really seems to involve both God's preceptive, as well as, his decretive will. Perhaps that is correct but it would seem to me that at least the emphasis is on the preceptive will.

The second question in relation to what precisely are we asking I think relates then

to this last phrase of the petition “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We can ask the question what is the significance of that last phrase? Why is it put in that way? The catechism says that we submit to God’s will in all things in the way that the angels do in heaven and that’s the significance here, we will submit to God’s will as the angels do in heaven. I think that is undoubtedly involved and that is undoubtedly correct in the intent of this phrase. But when you reflect on that you realize that that has not always been the case in heaven. The heavenly beings are now obedient. God’s will is done in heaven. We are to pray that it may also be done on earth but there’s a long history behind that expression when you think about it, and I think that it’s in that history that the third petition finds its real significance.

That history involves, let me give you three points. It involves the deforming of earth from heaven, the reforming of heaven from earth, and then ultimately the reforming of earth from heaven. I’ll give them to you again: the deforming of earth from heaven, the reforming of heaven from earth, and the reforming of earth ultimately from heaven.

That history becomes important when we realize there was a time when this prayer could not be prayed “thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” Adam and Eve lived for a time in the Garden of Eden in obedience to God on earth prior to their fall into sin. But in heaven the situation was different, Satan had rebelled against God and there was rebellion and revolt in heaven. There was disobedience in heaven. Before Satan came to the Garden of Eden the proper prayer for Adam would have been “thy will be done in heaven as it is on earth.” Exactly the reverse. There was revolution in heaven but obedience on earth. But then with the coming of Satan in the form of a serpent and the temptation in the garden in which Adam and Eve succumbed and fell. With the fall of man into sin and disobedience towards God there was rebellion here on earth and then God’s will was done neither on earth nor in heaven. So you have the deforming, you might say, of earth from heaven as Satan rebelled against God and came down here and tempted Adam and Eve, and led man into sin with all the results of that.

Subsequent to that, you find in the book of Job a very interesting section in the first part of the book where you see Satan as one of the angelic beings or spiritual beings

who has access to the very presence of God in heavenly places. Satan comes in before God in heaven and says to God “let me bring in certain experiences into the life of Job and you will find that what Job will do is turn against you and curse you.” God permits Satan to go, at least within certain limits, in this direction and to bring these things into the experience of Job. Fortunately Job stands the test and does not fall. But you find Satan here in heaven as the accuser of men before God. He has access to God, and as long as Satan is in that position we might say there is no room for this prayer, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Satan is in heaven, he is in rebellion against God. He is the accuser of men but when Christ teaches his disciples to pray this he gives them this phrase and we ask why. Why is heaven to be the example for the earth? Why do we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”? Isn’t there disobedience in heaven also?

I think that possibly the answer to this is to be found in several passages in the New Testament, one of which is in Revelation 12 and particularly verses 7-12. We could read the whole chapter but let’s look at verse 7 and following: “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, who deceived the whole world. He was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ. For the accuser of our brethren is cast down, who accused them before our God day and night.” That one who had access before God has been thrown out. “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.”

Now we can’t possibly discuss all the questions concerning Revelation chapter 12 and its interpretation this morning. But of course, the question is: when was Satan cast out of heaven? When did this take place? And many interpreters would take Revelation

chapter 12 as in verse 1 where you get the picture of a woman clothed with the sun and the moon having a crown of 12 stars that's Israel. And that woman gives birth to a son who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron, that's Jesus. In verses 3 and 4 she is opposed by a dragon, Satan. When in verse 5 the son is called up to heaven, it is the ascension of Christ. Then immediately follows what we just read in verses 7-12, the dragon is cast out of heaven as soon as Christ ascends into heaven. Then the dragon persecutes both the woman and the rest of her offspring, the whole testimony to Jesus, he persecutes the church.

Now, if that's a correct understanding of Revelation chapter 12, I think the sequence then is this, in Job we see Satan as the accuser of the brethren, he holds his right to do that on the basis of the justice of God in view of the sinfulness of men. But when Christ came at his first advent and he withstood Satan both in his active and passive obedience. Christ broke the power of Satan, he withstood the temptations of Satan, remember in the wilderness. Then he suffered and he died and he had victory over death and the power of Satan was destroyed. With that active and passive obedience, Satan's right to remain in heaven as the accuser is broken and he is cast out of heaven.

So you might say then Christ reformed heaven from his work on earth. First, the earth was deformed from heaven and now Christ reforms heaven from his work here on earth. Satan's power is broken. He is cast out. So that we pray then for God's will to be done on earth from the perspective that this has been accomplished already in heaven by the power of Christ. It gives us a perspective, it shows what has already been done and we pray for God's will to be done on earth from the standpoint that we know, that that has already been accomplished in heaven by the power of Christ. Then that same power is open and ready to work in us, that same power is our possession to give us victory over the power of Satan that is here on earth. We are told in Scripture that he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. We are to overcome by the power of the Lamb that works in us, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

As we look at the denigration of the world today, the increase of evil, the shamelessness of evil doers, and see all the problems that exist in the world we can tend

to be discouraged perhaps and then as we look at ourselves and understand something of our own failings and weaknesses and proneness to sin and to wander from the Lord, we might be discouraged. But we need to remember that we have the power of Christ available to us and we pray “thy will be done” in my life and in your life, “as it is in heaven.” Now I think that when we pray this prayer with that background or that history in mind, we are given assurance that our prayer is not in vain. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” that which has been accomplished in heaven can now also be accomplished on earth because of the power of Christ.

I think, then, the prayer also takes on eschatological significance. When the devil was cast out in verse 12 of Revelation chapter 12 you read “Woe to the earth, Satan goes about with great wrath because he knoweth that he has but a short time.” But on the other hand, Christ is now in heaven as our advocate. We are told in Scripture that Christ will ultimately come again. At that time Satan will be bound and cast into the lake of fire ultimately and then we will see at that end time the reformation of earth from heaven. Do you get that whole sequence? I think that to get that perspective is helpful in understanding what we are asking for and we are reassured then in the response and the answer to our prayer when we say “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let us pray: we thank you this morning our Father, for the great victory that was won by the Lord Jesus Christ as he defeated Satan in his life here on earth by his obedience to you and his suffering and his death and his victory over death and hell. We thank you that we know that the power of the risen Lord is available to us in our lives. We pray this morning that as we seek to obey you and to do your will that we may experience in our lives the power of Christ and the grace of God that will enable us to be what you would want us to be and we look forward to that time when the victory will be complete here on earth and when your Son will rule in righteousness and great glory and every knee shall bow before him. We thank you for all of your mercies and your grace, in Jesus name, Amen.