

Ps 102:1
 Ps 119:34,35 (following Nicene)
 Ps 142:1,2,3,4,5,6
 Ps 17:3
 Ps 66:7,8
 Mark 11:11-25
 1 Kings 18:16-46
 Lord's Day 45

Yarrow, January 9, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We've completed section of the Catechism on Ten Commandments; now move on to Prayer.

- These two form bulk of material covered in 3rd part of *Heidelberg Catechism*, re Gratitude (for Deliverance from Sin & Misery).
 - So we not surprised at opening sentence of A 116: prayer is chief part of thankfulness God requires of us.
- But truth be said: we don't commonly find praying all that easy.... Experience it as hard work, and not all that helpful. In busy-ness of life even seems bit of a waste of time....
 - Then read word as Jesus' spoke in Mark 11:24, and we ask selves: that true?? I prayed..., and it didn't happen.... Don't I have enough faith? Or don't I rate with God?? Or is unanswered prayer proof God not really exist??

ASK AND YOU WILL RECEIVE.

1. Why we may ask,
2. What we may ask,
3. Who may ask?

1. Why we may ask.

We all pray. But what actually is prayer?? *Talking with God.*

- We realize talking with God a marvel. For:
 - He Creator, ie, almighty, eternal, heavenly. ∴: angels cover faces because of His holiness (cf Isaiah 6)
 - We dust, creatures. Yet He lends us His ear! See Genesis 3:8. Marvel!! Wonderful! This because God condescends to establish bond of love with creatures.
 - Why does He? Why prayer/speaking together a critical part of covenant, of being human??
 - God created mankind to image Him, ie, rule as God would (cf Genesis 1:26ff). Ie, Lord as it were steps back a step from His creation, and gives mankind space to make decisions and implement them (and he to do it as God would). This decision making process includes speaking with God about what needs to happen and asking for His will – prayer.
 - So prayer to be about Adam's/Eve's everyday bits and pieces...; not just the 'holy' parts of life.

- God would answer prayer, ie, His manner of governing world would take into account Adam's wishes/needs as he saw it in the garden. ie, prayer/speaking with God effective, had results.
 - This all caught in notion of man being made to rule over God's world.
 - NOTE: means Jesus' promise not new, eg Matthew 7:7f; John 14:13f. Or Mark 11:24.... This reality of Paradise!
- But: rebellion, fall. ∴ Genesis 3:23. Distance between holy God and sinner.
 - Yet God allows contact, conversation. See tabernacle in Israel, ie, sacrifices....
 - Point: talking with God possible because of coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But clear: it God who sets agenda for what to talk about with God, ie, contours of Genesis 1f remain important. For sinners that's hard work.... We think of selves....
- Christ came, atoned for sin, ∴ reconciled sinners with God. See Romans 5:1f, 8:34. ∴ Ephesians 3:12, Hebrews 10:19-22.
 - Christ intercedes, and God always hears His Son, cf Luke 22:31f, cf 54f, 62* Privilege!
- So Jesus' instruction for us so delightful: Matthew 7:7f; John 14:13f, Mark 11:24.... This reality of Paradise *restored!*
- But here we encounter big problems.
 - Each one of us somewhere along line has asked Lord to give us something, eg, healing of loved one, and it not happened. ∴ puzzled/questions:
 - Don't I have enough faith? Is prayer a farce? Don't I count in God's eyes? Must I conclude from 'unanswered' prayer that God not real??
 - Are ample around world who gave up faith precisely because God said He'd hear/answer, but doesn't. We understand...; is temptation here for us too.
 - So we need to grapple with Jesus' instruction. Do so by looking at Mark 11. This our 2nd point:

2. What we may ask

Vs 24 reads as blanket statement: ask anything you wish, will be given. Clearly isn't so. Eg, if I ask God to Self-destruct, His promise surely isn't to do what I ask. ∴ Q: what the boundaries of what I may ask? What Jesus mean here??

- Basic rule of thumb for all reading: read the context! Here too. When Jesus say this??
- Vs 11: Jesus entered Jerusalem, temple, looked around. Late, ∴ did nothing; to Bethany (2 km from Jerusalem)
- What Jesus see in temple??
 - Altar, sacrifices, priests busy, ie, proclamation of gospel.... ie, why talking with God is possible again!
 - But in background cacophony of noise from market, ie, mooing of cattle and bleating of sheep. More, shouts of hawkers as seek to catch attention of buyers = those who would bring sacrifices. See vs 15.
 - Point: God's intent was that temple be "house of prayer for all nations" (cf vs 17), but in fact it a "den of robbers" (cf vs 17b, from Jeremiah 7:11), ie, place driven by greed-feeding-on-religion.
 - See Jeremiah 7: vs 2ff: we're OK, temple OK.... Yet apostasy, cf vs 5,9, etc. ∴ promise of judgment, cf vs 12ff.

- Why should temple of Jerusalem in Jesus' day think it will survive?!
 - God deals with His people per covenant, ie, blessing on obedience, curse on disobedience. Recall last week re Leviticus 26.
 - Hence Jesus' words of Mark 13:2.
- Mark 11:11→Jesus leaves temple for Bethany for night. Next morning return to Jerusalem/temple.
 - On way, Jesus sees fig tree, cf vs 13. Looked good, ie, lots of foliage. Jesus approach to look for fruit. None (not season).
 - ∴ curse of vs 14. Ie, Jesus asks God to carry out this curse. This a *prayer*.
 - Why Jesus pray this??
 - Fig tree was desired tree in Old Testament, with delicious and abundant fruit, and so symbol of contentment, cf 1 Kings 4:25. So also picture of God's goodness in covenant to His people.
 - But since sin attracts curse, withering of fig tree (or fruitlessness) became symbol of God's judgment on Israel. See Jeremiah 8:13; Amos 4:9.
 - Ie, Jesus works with this Old Testament symbolism, curses fig tree *as warning/indication to disciples of what must* (by God's decree in covenant) *happen to temple/Jerusalem*.
 - Then to temple to confront with Word of God (ie, need to repent), ie, overturn merchandise, temple to be house of prayer.
 - But no repentance, cf vs 18a
 - Jesus leave city (for Bethany again?)
- Next morning: back to Jerusalem. Disciples observe fig tree withered. ∴ Peter, vs 21.
 - Ie, surprise: Your prayer was heard!!
 - ∴ Jesus' reply in 22: "Have faith in God." Ie, isn't He faithful to promises?? So if you remind Him of His own promises, won't He do what He said He'd do?! Isn't this the principle of Genesis 1 re image of God??
 - That why Jesus mentions vs 23. "This mtn" ≠Vedder Mtn; = Mt Zion, where temple built. According to promises of God to punish disobedience, temple to be razed, ie, destroyed, ie, mountain effectively hauled away.... So: you remind God of His promise, He will do it – for He faithful.
 - ∴ general promise of vs 24: whatever you ask = in line with God's covenant promises. Remind Him of His Word, and He will fulfill it.
 - True: you to *believe* that God both mighty to do as said, and faithful to do as promised. Ie, no small thoughts of God. Take Him for real, *and take for real His manner of operating in this world*. (This what Adam obviously did...)
 - He given promises in covenant with people, He wants children's interaction with those promises (in terms of obedience, trust, prayer).
- What we have??
 - Prayer involves confessing God's majesty/greatness, confessing our privileged place as image of God in world so as to think things through and rule as He'd have things done. Involves speaking with God, and God responds to His people's thoughts. So to acknowledge that He has ordained that prayer has a critical function in what happens in His world, ie, He fulfils promises *when/because children ask*.
 - That why A 116 begins with reference to prayer being most important part of thankfulness God requires of us.

- Work of Jesus Christ restores us to God, ie, access to Him. What for?? To carry out purpose of Genesis 2:15, ie, tend/keep garden, ie, govern world.
 - ∴ James 5:16b. Don't belittle prayer!!! See A 116b*
- Follows: we're not to ask for whatever wishes we may have. We not here for selves, cf Genesis 1:26ff; 2:15.
 - ∴ A 117ab, Question & Answer 118.
 - What "we need" not for us to determine, ie, our desires sinful. Rather, God has promised to work via covenant structure, including that we pray His promises (of blessing and curse) into existence. So we to work with those parameters.
- An example?? See James 5:17f. Cf Leviticus 26:3f, 14f, 19. Elijah lives in days of Ahab = king who officially introduced Baal worship into Israel. ∴ what Elijah to pray?? Repentance?? Sure. But is none. ∴ took God's own promises and prayed them back to God. God answered so that no rain. Result?? Israel on knees, compelled to acknowledge Baal useless, God alone powerful to give rain (cf I Kings 18:16ff).
 - ∴ 3rd point:

3. Who may ask?

Obvious: *all those redeemed by Jesus' blood*. For Saviour reconciled these persons to God.... For them relation of Paradise restored.

- That's why Lord's Day 45 speaks of 'us', 'we' – for *Heidelberg Catechism* is confession of those who say with Lord's Day 1 that "I belong ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ"; God my Father.
 - Notice James 5:17a. Ie, *Elijah not unique!* You/I also can pray and there are powerful results.
 - Notice also Paul's instruction to saints of Thessalonica, cf 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Why "continually"? Your daily life is always in God's presence, you ruling over God's world. So need conversation with Him!
- So: what shall we pray?
 - Obvious now: pray *God's promises into reality!*
 - Ask for sick brother to be healed?? Sure. But be aware: God has not promised healing. So don't be disappointed if He not grant it. Leave manner of hearing your prayer to Him.
 - Conversely: God has promised to press His hand of displeasure on covenant breakers. We see brothers and sisters disobeying Lord?? Dare to ask God to pour out judgment on them!! See obedience? Ask for blessing!
 - Involves: *know your Bible*, ie, know God's promises in covenant (of blessing and curse), know too how God plans to rule His world. Your prayer/wishes to be in step with His revealed will.
 - *Believe*: God able to do as ask – and willing also, for He faithful to His promises.
- Does this make prayer easy?? No, it's hard work. For it involves knowing God's Word, involves analysing your situation, and involves thinking through what God's promise is in this situation. And especially: *deny self!*
 - Then promise is: He hears.
- Daunting? Sure, hard work is hard work. But *being involved in God's government of His world is such a privilege!! For this you created* (and not for self!), *and for this you redeemed/renewed!*