

**"NOT MY WILL,  
BUT THINE BE  
DONE"**

By

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**INTRODUCTION**

It has been argued that to end one's prayer with these words is to exhibit a lack of faith. These words were part of the Lord's high priestly prayer; they are not to be our words. "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father will be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14: 13-14 NASB)<sup>1</sup> makes it clear that our prayer life must be characterized by boldness – a confidence that God will act on our behalf. This leads one to wonder: Does this promise by our Lord constitute a blank cheque? Is the Lord saying here that no matter what one's request may be He is obliged to accede? What are the implications of such an understanding?

Prayer is the believer's vital breath – an oft-heard phrase. And it is not only a truism, but it is also true, since God is, in fact, in control of His universe and so dependence on Him is not optional. It is, therefore, important that the believer understands its

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<sup>1</sup> This, and all subsequent Scripture references, will be from the *New American Standard Translation*.

significance and grapple with the issue of whether there are limitations on what and how s/he should pray. An examination of the promise in context, along with other statements made on the issue, as well as of the prayer life of both Old and New Testament saints shall reveal the perspective through which Jesus' pronouncement must be understood.

### **The Purpose of John's Gospel**

John expresses his overall, overriding purpose in writing his gospel as engendering belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, producing life – eternal life – in the believer. As he sought to achieve this purpose, John presented many signs that Jesus did. These “many signs” were “signs of the supreme sign, which is itself also the thing signified, that is the historical death and resurrection of the Lord” (Lightfoot 1956, 22). Jesus' whole life can, therefore, be said to be “a sign, in action, of the love of God” (Lightfoot 23). He was not simply interested in doing wonders and arousing wonder, but in creating a wonder: lives transformed by His grace. So, even as John highlights the work of the Lord, he also looks at the responsibilities of the believer, for s/he who has received life must do what John was doing: testify of the Giver of life.

This was the focus of John 14. In this chapter we ‘hear’ Jesus speaking to his disciples about the task ahead of them – a task they would have to accomplish without His physical presence.

### **THE BELIEVER'S RESPONSIBILITY: TESTIFYING TO THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST**

“He who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do because I go to the Father” (John 14: 12). Awesome responsibility. But, what are these “greater works”?

## **Campbell: "Not my will, but thine be done**

Some argue that they are greater in quality – that the disciples would perform miracles that not even Jesus Himself performed. This position, however, is hard to defend from history and from theology. No accounts in the history of the Church reveal the performance of any work that is greater than raising someone from the dead, much less raising oneself from the dead. And theologically, what Jesus came to do for us we could not do for ourselves. He came to and did overcome the stranglehold sin and Satan had on our lives. What in the world could be considered greater in quality than that? He met our greatest need.

Quantity, not quality, others argue. "Greater" signifies the amount of work to be done. Since they were more in number, the disciples would be able to relate to more people, and cover more ground literally – Jesus' ministry was localized, parochial (He came to the lost sheep of Israel) – and so have more ministry opportunities. Carson, however, contends that "greater works" cannot simply mean "more works"; there are "perfectly good Greek ways of saying 'more', and in any case the meaning would then be unbearably trite" – it is too obvious a point – more people must be able to do more work over time (Carson 1991, 495). He continues to explain that:

The works that the disciples performed after the resurrection is greater than those done by Jesus before His death insofar as the former belong to an age of clarity and power introduced by Jesus' sacrifice and exaltation ... The 'signs' and 'works' Jesus performed during his ministry could not fully accomplish their true end until after Jesus had risen from the dead and been exalted. Only at that point could they be seen for what they were. By contrast, the work believers are given to do through the power of the eschatological Spirit, after Jesus' glorification, will be set in the framework of Jesus' death and triumph, and will therefore more immediately and truly reveal the Son. (Carson 1991, 496)

And being thus set, it cannot be said to be greater qualitatively. And though one could still argue for a "quantitative reading" of the

term, it must be acknowledged that Carson presents a plausible understanding. The disciples' works will be greater in effect. Not because Jesus was an ineffective minister, but because He Himself limited the scope of His outreach, and in His wisdom placed the responsibility for winning souls into the hands of his followers. The groundwork was laid by Jesus to be continued by Him through His disciples. After all, the purpose for which He died was to save us from sin. Acceptance of the gospel message is critical for this purpose to be achieved and so gospel proclamation is essential. And so, just as He had come in the fullness of time, so in the fullness of time the work of world evangelism was to begin: when He was glorified. This is borne out by his statement: "Greater works than these shall you do *because I go to the Father.*" The works of which the Lord spoke "would still be His own works, accomplished no longer by His visible presence among them but by His Spirit within them" (Bruce 1983, 300).

Now one may reasonably ask: What does all this have to do with prayer? How does this help us to understand the Lord's promise to answer *whatever* we ask in His name? Actually, it is critical to our understanding, for the promise is set in exactly this context: that the disciples must engage in declaring to the world the fact that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14: 6). A reading of *Acts* will reveal that this was, in essence, the disciple's mission and that all the wondrous signs that God performed through them were for the purpose of evangelizing the world: pointing people to Christ for their salvation; and edifying His Church: pointing the believers to Christ for their sanctification. The definite link between this and the prayer life of the believer is made clearer by the Lord in subsequent statements.

**THE BELIEVER'S RESPONSIBILITY: PRAYING IN THE  
NAME OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST**

You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you.

**John15:16**

Jesus, in this verse, says more explicitly that it is the prayer of fruit bearers that will be answered. Now, fruit bearing has little, if anything, to do with the *number* of souls we have won for Christ. We can only do what Paul and Apollos did: sow and water; it is God and God alone who gives the increase. Fruit bearing comes out of abiding; it comes out of relationship. "If you *love* Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14: 15). And what does the Lord command? That we love one another (John 13: 34; 15:17). Then the fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our lives.<sup>2</sup> Our relationship with our God is evidenced by our love of the brethren. Both the believer and unbeliever recognize this relationship when we love one another (John 13: 35). How much more if we love our enemies as Christ enjoins us in Matt. 5: 44! It is love (for the Lord and for our fellow human beings) that motivates our mission to the world; it is love that motivates our mission to the Church. And it is in love that our mission should be carried out. There is, therefore, an integral relationship between the works the disciples were called to do (John 14:12) and the fruit bearing spoken of in John 15. So "whatever you ask in My name" is not an unqualified "whatever." It is qualified by the works – or should we say 'fruit' – produced by abiding in the vine.

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<sup>2</sup> One can argue quite convincingly that the fruit of the Spirit is love, out of which flows joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control because Paul in 1Corinthians 13 defines love rather descriptively in terms of these qualities.

It is also qualified by the expression “in My name.” And this is not unrelated to fruit bearing. “When Jesus encouraged the apostles to pray in His name, he was not referring to an expression tacked on at the end of a prayer” (*New International Encyclopaedia of Bible Words* [NIEBW], s.v. “name”). In Biblical cultures, “to be sent or to speak in someone’s name meant to carry that person’s authority” (*The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “name”). It is important for us to recognize, though, that this is delegated authority and that with authority comes responsibility (borne out by the linking of prayer with works). It is also important to understand that a person’s name not only identified him in terms of pointing him out, but “communicated something of the essence, the character, or the reputation of the person named.” (NIEBW, s.v. “name”) So when one says “in the name of Jesus” one is speaking as His representative, and therefore with His authority, and what one says must be in accord with His nature, character and will. In effect one is saying, “His will be done.”

But how shall we know His will? And what sense does it make to pray at all if prayer is only an affirmation of what God has already decided to do?

#### How will we know His will?

No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what His master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I’ve heard from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15)

Just as Jesus knew what was in the mind of His Father and “did not speak on His own initiative” (John 12:49) but declared, “The things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me” (John 12:50), so have we been placed in the privileged position of being able to know the very heart of God. How unfortunate it is that we have been so self-consumed that we have not laid claim to this. We have been more interested in having our wills done – gratifying our own desires. But this is counterproductive. Praying according to the will of God is the only guarantee of answered prayer. Does not the Holy

## **Campbell: "Not my will, but thine be done"**

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Spirit reveal through James that some "ask but do not receive because [they] ask with wrong motives so that [they] may spend it on [their] pleasures" (James 4:3)? And does He not reveal through Paul that we do not know how to pray and so He intercedes on our behalf? Because of our frailty, finitude and fallibility, we are not always in a place where we readily discern all that Christ "has made known to us," but in our weakness the Holy Spirit is our help. Hodge sums it up thus: Not "every specific request made with the assurance of its being granted, shall be granted" (Hannah 1979, 346). He tells us why:

1. Because it would be to submit the divine government to the erring wisdom of men.
2. Because it would lead to undesirable or disastrous consequences. Men might pray for things that would be their own ruin and the ruin of others.
3. It is contrary to all experience.
4. It is contrary to the desire of every pious heart, as [Christians] would rather that God's will than [their] own be done. (Hannah 1979, 346)

And so it is in order for the believer to pray: This is what I want, dear Lord, but your will be done, for You know best. After all, the aim of answered prayer is the glorification of the Father and the Son (John 14:14).

And yet the question still begs to be asked: What sense does it make to pray at all if prayer is only an affirmation of what God has already decided to do? Affirming what the good, wise and loving God we serve has already decided to do should be an honour. And can you imagine actually knowing what to affirm?! God has really been gracious to share with us mere mortals His plans and purposes. It is an indication that we are indeed a part of His family and that He loves us.

He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and He who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and disclose Myself to him. (John 14:21)

The fact is that, generally speaking, the one to whom the Lord reveals His will is the one who loves His will. Love of God leads to love of His will. So it is the one who abides in the Vine, Jesus, who prays in His name. Such a person is a fruit bearer; he has godly character and obeys the Father's commands as a result of his intimate relationship with Him and through prayer seeks to grow in this relationship.

Through prayer we relate to God person to Person. We communicate with our Father. "Prayer then is not so much asking favours as it is a worshipful intercourse that includes requests" (Hannah 1979, 353).

## **PEOPLE OF PRAYER**

Throughout the Scriptures, we read of people who had a relationship with Yahweh and were not afraid to talk to Him. Three such persons are Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah. Prayer, for them, was more than activity and so their experiences can teach us a lot about the value and the purpose of prayer.

### **Moses**

Moses was the friend of God. He communed with God. He "is regarded as 'Man of God' (Deut. 33:1; Josh 14:6) and 'Servant of the Lord' (Josh. 1:1). The conclusion is inevitable: One who bears this title cannot act in independence, cannot speak his own words or walk in his own ways" (Hezog 1990, 258). And this was evident in his conversations with God. One such conversation took place after the people of Israel had sinned by worshipping a golden calf in contravention of the Law of God. They worshipped it in place of the only true and living God and ascribed to it the praise that was due to Him for delivering them from slavery. This incensed God and in His anger, He determined to destroy them and "make of [Moses] a nation" (Exod. 32:10). But Moses interceded on their behalf. His



## **Campbell: "Not my wul, but thine be done**

petition to God reveals the character of the man but more so his understanding, limited though it was, of the character of God. God who had promised was obliged to keep His promise and so Moses 'reminded' God,

Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself ... I will multiply thy descendants ... and all this land I will give to [them] and they shall inherit it forever. (Exod. 32:13)

God had sworn by Himself, by His name. How could He now impugn His own name by wiping out His people? Moses had a basis on which to petition. One could, in fact, suggest that Moses was God's mediator. The people's sin required judgement and was even worthy of as drastic an action as annihilation, but God in His grace had already determined to bless them, knowing how much they would fail Him. How could He save them and yet be true to His attributes of holiness and justice? By providing an intercessor, a mediator – Moses. When you're God's friend, doing God's work, God shows you His ways as He did with Moses.

### **Elijah**

Elijah, like Moses, was a prophet of God and a man of prayer. James 5:17 tells us of two prayers that he said. In the first, he "prayed earnestly that it might not rain." And it did not rain. For three and a half years it did not rain. What a peculiar prayer! Why such a prayer? Elijah's prayer is recorded in 1 Kings 17:1 as a pronouncement against Ahab who had built an altar and a dwelling place for Baal and committed other heinous crimes. Of him it was said: "Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). Elijah knew that God was a God of justice and that both Ahab and rebellious Israel needed to be judged of God. Such sin should not go unpunished. And so he prayed: Judge them Lord.

In his second prayer, he prayed for rain and “the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:18). Why ask for a reversal of fortunes? Elijah knew that the God of grace and mercy responds to the contrite heart – all in line with His nature. Jonah knew this too. He knew that his prophecy of Nineveh’s overthrow would not come to pass if the people repented of their sins. “I know that [You] are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and One who relents concerning calamity” (Jon. 4:2) are words from Jonah’s prayer of distress. He had desired Nineveh’s demise. Elijah, on the other hand, happily prayed *for* Israel’s well being upon their repentance. As a matter of fact, he was instrumental in getting them to that place. First he challenged them. Testifying to the Lordship of Yahweh, he gave them an ultimatum: “If the Lord is God follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). Then he demonstrated that Yahweh was the only true God. He called on his God to do that which Baal could not do: respond to the plea of His servant by sending down fire from heaven to consume a totally soaked sacrifice. It was then that the people with one voice asserted: Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God. Mission accomplished. It was after this that he prayed for rain. Elijah was in tune with God’s will and prayed accordingly. But this was not always the case.

Both Elijah and Jonah requested of the Lord that their lives be taken (1 Kings 19:4; Jon. 4:3) and both requests were denied. God does not answer every prayer in the affirmative simply because it was said with much fervour and conviction. His nature and His plans and purposes are determining factors. Just like Elijah and Jonah, Jeremiah also found that out.

## **Jeremiah**

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet for good reason. He lamented over the spiritual condition of his people and their

## **Campbell: "Not my will, but thine be done"**

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impending exile. God had determined to punish them: "I have purposed and I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it" (Jer.4: 28). This He reiterated in chapter 14. Knowing Jeremiah's compassionate disposition, God told him not to intercede on the nation's behalf (Jer.14:11) and stated that He would not be moved by religious rites, such as fasting and sacrifice (14:12). When Jeremiah attempted to intercede (14:19-22), the Lord responded: "Even if Moses and Samuel [whose prayer had saved the nation on several occasions; Exod. 32:9-14; Num. 14:11-23; 1 Sam. 7:2-13; 12:19] were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people ... (Jer.15: 1)" (Zuck, Merrill and Bock 1991, 348).

God actually told one of His prophets not to intercede. And when he did, his prayers went unanswered. God is sovereign. As Robert Sproul contends we "cannot manipulate God. [We] cannot manipulate Him by incantations, repetition, public utterances, or [our] own predictions" (Hannah 1979, 248). He asks the question: "When we are talking about God's sovereignty, do we think for a moment that if there is a conflict of interests between the will of God and [our] will, that [our] will could possibly prevail" (Hannah 1979, 348)?

### **GOD'S RESPONSIBILITY: PRODUCING CHARACTER IN HIS SAINTS**

Although God's will must of necessity override and overrule ours, it is good to know that in His sovereignty He has determined that He will be touched with the feelings of our infirmities as expressed in prayer. And so we can freely express our hurts and pain – even our problem with His sovereignty. For, we do not always understand why He does what He does. And we can freely plead our case before Him through supplications and intercessions. "Make your request known to God" is a biblical command. He does want to hear what concerns us. Why? Because He is concerned about us.

And in His response to our petitions, God is able to express that concern.

Through prayer “the treasures of God’s promises come to the believer” (Hannah 1979, 345). God has made many promises to His saints that can only be appropriated through prayer. “Seek and you shall find, ask and you shall receive, knock and the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7). James tells us one reason we do not receive what we desire is because we do not ask. Another reason is wavering faith. There are times when we succumb to the temptation to doubt God where God has promised He will deliver. It must be borne in mind, however, that some promises are unconditional while others have conditions attached. One promise we sometimes fail to appropriate is His promise to forgive us of and cleanse us from confessed sin. Confession presupposes a spirit of repentance but it does not require actual change of conduct prior to its utterance. Yet, too often the prayer of confession is not made. Interestingly, this prayer of confession may in itself be a condition for the answering of other prayers, for God does say if we regard iniquity in our hearts He will not hear us (Ps. 66:18).

When we, in humility and contrition, go before God we know that we will receive much more than we can even imagine much less actually ask for. Indeed, Hannah puts it this way:

The necessity and utility of this exercise of prayer no words can sufficiently express. Assuredly it is not without cause our heavenly Father declares that our only safety is in calling upon his name, since by it we provoke the presence of his providence to watch over our interests, of his power to sustain us when weak and almost fainting, of his goodness to receive us into favour, though miserably loaded with sin, in fine, call upon him to manifest himself to us in all his perfections. Hence, admirable peace and tranquillity are given to our consciences. (Hannah 1979, 347)

These benefits of prayer are part and parcel of God’s work on us. And so we find that prayer changes us, with or without a change in circumstance. We see the apostle Paul, for example, plagued with a

## **Campbell: "Not my will, but thine be done**

**"thorn in the flesh" – an unknown malady – receiving as an answer to his supplication to God for its removal: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness," to which he responded: "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me ... for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9, 10). Paul recognized that it was more important that God should develop character in him through suffering than that He should provide comfort for him through its removal. James echoes a similar sentiment: "Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance ... that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).**

**Even when imprisoned, when death was a distinct possibility, Paul was praising God and praying for the saints. Why? His circumstances had "turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). Firstly, the unsaved including the praetorian guards were hearing the gospel as news spread of his arrest for the cause of Christ and secondly – and ironically – many believers were emboldened to share the Word of God. Sinners were evangelized; saints were edified, built up in their faith. And Paul was elated, overjoyed. He understood John 14:12-13. Life, including prayer is kingdom business. Its focus must not be on the self, though self is not excluded, but on the advancement of God's kingdom. Anything that is requested, whether personal or not, which will result in this, will indeed be granted. "Seek first the kingdom of God" and then all other needs will be met (Matt. 6:33), for they will be put in proper perspective. No wonder Paul prayed that the Philippians "may approve the things that are excellent in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:10). Paul wanted for them what God wanted, not only for them, but also for us: godly character.**

## CONCLUSION

An important question to ask is “Am I feigning faith or actually living by it?” Do I trust God enough to pray, “Thy will be done?” Or do I trust myself more and so declare, “My will be done, Lord. My will be done”? How can it reasonably be argued that to say “Thy will be done” demonstrates lack of faith when such a statement taken at face value must indicate the opposite – dependence on God and confidence in Him? For what He desires for us must be that which is best for us. If our Lord could say “Not my will, but ...,” how can we who struggle with sin do any less?

The Old and New Testament saints are testimony to the fact that the purpose of prayer is not to satisfy self but to glorify God. The experiences of Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah and Paul – to name a few – show in no uncertain way the purpose of prayer.

Prayer is really communion with God. In it and through it we deepen our relationship with Him. In it and through it He communicates His will to us. In it and through it, He allows us to participate in His work, His mission. Taylor quite rightly contends that “prayer is a gift of God’s presence where God makes Himself present to, for and with us and in turn enables us to make ourselves present to, for and with Him – the gift of shared presence” (Taylor 2003). And one could add that in it God enables us to make ourselves present to and for the world and our fellow believers. There is a Mission to be fulfilled through prayer, -- a Mission that glorifies the Father and the Son. Seek *first* the kingdom of God! God’s business must be the subject of prayer.

Whatsoever we ask in Jesus’ name, we shall indeed receive! If ...



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