



Minutes With Messiah

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God, the Collector

I used to collect postage stamps. I haven't actively worked that collection for years (decades?), but I was once an avid philatelist. Now I collect Pez candy dispensers, the ones with tops representing fictional persons or some objects. It seems that almost everyone I know has some sort of collection—owls, saltshakers, cows, coins. Perhaps it is instinctive in man to collect things. If so, perhaps it is because God is also a collector. His may be the weirdest collection of all. God collects tears. "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Ps 56:8)

Tears? Yes, God collects your tears and my tears. He keeps them in a wineskin. More importantly, he is a meticulous collector. Many birdwatchers keep a log of when and where they make a sighting. God does the same with the tears he collects; he logs the date and time and circumstances in his book. Laura: March 17, 1974, AM, Greenville, TX, childbirth. Tim: August 18, 2002, 10:30 PM, joy at getting the role of Tevye (he thanked me). David (King): 1029 BC, for Bathsheba's first child. And on and on, records of every tear collected.

Why would God do this? Why collect tears? Well, why do we collect things? Because they are important to us. Because they are valuable. Because they are of interest to us. All these and more apply to God's collection.

Tears must be valuable to God. At least, we must think so. The Bible is full of stories about people coming to God with tears, hoping for a blessing. Tears are the currency of a broken heart. When we have nothing else to offer God, we offer tears, and that is when God listens. Sometimes we are like Jeremiah (Lam 2:11) and have no more tears to offer. But that makes them even more valuable to God. Luke 7:36-50 tells the story of a woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears. Those tears were so valuable that, as a result of them, Jesus forgave her sins.

Tears are of interest to God. There is no evidence of God ever weeping or shedding tears. Yet

when he experienced what we experience, tears were very much a part of his learning about us. Besides the woman mentioned earlier, we know that Peter wept bitterly because he denied Jesus (Matt 26:75). Jesus, himself, shed tears on more than one occasion. The best known is when, outside the tomb of Lazarus "Jesus wept." (Jn 11:35) But he also wept over the city of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41). In Hebrews 5:7 the writer tells of Jesus praying with "strong crying and tears," most likely referring to his prayers in Gethsemane just before he was taken to be tried and crucified.

I think there is another reason that God collects our tears. I think he is trying to collect them all so that we don't have any more. You see, God's plan for us is that we have no need for tears. He told Jeremiah (31:16) to stop crying because Israel would return from captivity. David said, "the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling." (Ps 116:7-8) Part of God's blessing for us, then, is deliverance from tears. God's practice of collecting our tears will continue until we no longer need them. "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces." (Isa 25:8, quoted in 1 Cor 15:54; Rev 7:17; and Rev 21:14)

God is now a collector of tears. Soon will come a time when he stops collecting. It won't be for lack of interest, like with my old stamp collection. It will, hallelujah, be because there will be no more tears to collect!

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The Lord's Prayer, Part 2

Last month we introduced the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13) and looked at the prayer in general and the address of the prayer. This month we will look in some detail at the body of the prayer. Just as a letter consists of more than the address and salutation, so this prayer has a body. It is that body that gives it body, that is the substance of what we should be saying to God.

Put spiritual things first

As Jesus presents this prayer, the first thing after addressing and praising God are the spiritual requests. Quite often we who are bound up in the worries of our physical lives go straight to the physical matters. Jesus had his priorities straight. Later in the Sermon on the Mount he said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness." (Matt 6:33) This does not prevent us from seeking the physical; we just have to seek the spiritual first.

Tradition says that the sons of Joseph were engaged in different pursuits. Manasseh was the businessman of the family, while Ephraim spent much time in study of God's word. When Jacob blessed the two he said, "In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh: and he set Ephraim before Manasseh." (Gen 48:20) The lesson drawn from this is that study and spiritual things should take precedence over the physical, but also the two should achieve some balance.

To the ones to whom Jesus taught this prayer, though, this would fall under the physical and not the spiritual. Simon the Zealot must have loved praying this

Hear the separate voices of the disciples as they pray.

section more than any other. You can almost hear the separate voices of the disciples as they recite the prayer. Simon is louder here, Judas almost shouts the "daily bread" part, and one would hope that Peter's voice rang out on the "lead us not into temptation" section. It was only later that they would realize what Jesus meant when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world." (Jn 18:36) Even today many pray this in anticipation of a physical kingdom on this physical earth; they separate the kingdom and God's righteousness into two distinct realms.

Some people look upon Jesus' words as a model for prayer, but will not pray it themselves because the next phrase of the prayer is "thy kingdom come." The kingdom is the church, and so is already present on earth; it would be useless, they say, to pray that something come which is already here. I heard another interpretation which would negate this objection. We should be praying, the preacher said, that the kingdom of God come into our hearts and the hearts of others. Of course, at the time Jesus gave his disciples this prayer the kingdom was yet to appear. Whether this is a model or a prayer to actually be prayed, the point is that we should be praying for the kingdom of God.

The idea expressed by "thy kingdom come" is not necessarily that the kingdom come into being, but more that it will make its appearance. In this sense we can pray daily that God's kingdom will become more apparent in a world that is in desperate need of it. In praying "thy kingdom come" we may be praying that we make God's kingdom more apparent in our lives; that we show God's light rather than hiding it (Matt 5:15-16).

In another sense we can truly pray that God's kingdom come, in the future sense. Jesus is currently reigning over the kingdom. There will come a time when he gives that rule back to God.

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. (1 Cor 15:24-26)

In a very real sense, the kingdom is now Christ's. There will be a time when it will become God's. So we may pray that that time be soon. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." (Rev 22:20)

After praying about the kingdom, Jesus says to pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How we need to pray this! Ours is a world (as it has been for every generation) in which men are more concerned about doing what they want than what God wants. Maybe, I hope, we haven't gotten to the point that mankind reached before the flood, when "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen 6:5) But there are many in the world who have reached that point. We should be praying that, in our lives and in theirs, God's will would take priority.

Is it possible that God's will would not be done on earth? After all, isn't God all powerful and in control? "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) But we also know that man may choose not to obey God. There is a fine balance between God's will being done in the broad sense and his allowing man free choice. There will be times when we do not do what God wants us to do (Rom 7). Habakkuk asked God, "Why are you bringing the Chaldeans against Judah when they are more wicked than we are?" God's answer, in brief, was that the Chaldeans would also receive their punishment. In other words, as my mother often said, "don't worry about your brother, worry about yourself." Jesus chided Peter similarly, saying "If I will that he [John] tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me." (Jn 21:22) God is in control in the broader sense, and he can use those who don't follow his will to accomplish his purposes. But how much better and easier would it be if each individual sought to do God's will! This is more than just praying, on our own level, "nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." (Lk 22:42) We should be praying that God's will be done not only in ourselves but in others.

The physical one-liner

Finally (!) Jesus gets to the "meat and potatoes" of the prayer. Well, at least the bread. "Give us this day our daily bread." How many of our prayers are for the physical things! Jesus says those are important; but he places them after the spiritual. Even then, the prayers for our physical blessings are limited to the bare necessities. Jesus only expends one short sentence, one line, on the things for our physical bodies.

In America we don't always understand exactly what our Lord means here. We are used to being paid once or twice a month and making that last. The people Jesus spoke to, however, got paid each day for that day's work (see Matt 20:1-10). If Jesus' father didn't have a customer one day, if Peter and Andrew didn't catch anything, if a laborer had nobody to hire him, they and their families would go without for the day. "Give us this day our daily bread" translated to, "Give me a job today."

Of course, the Jewish hearers of this prayer would also think back to the exodus. Manna was, except on Friday, daily bread. "And Moses said, Let no man leave of it till the morning. Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto Moses; but some of them left of it until the morning, and it bred worms, and stank: and Moses was wroth with them. And they gathered it every morning, every man according to his eating: and when the sun waxed hot, it melted." (Ex 16:19-21) Moreover, it was sufficient. The man who gathered much had one *omer*; the man who gathered three crumbs of manna had

one *omer*. God provided just what was needed each day. The Israelites found something to grumble about even then. Likewise we grumble sometimes when we don't have our monthly bread, or two cars and a house with a three-car garage. Jesus wants us to be satisfied with what we have.

That does not prevent us from making requests. "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." (Php 4:6) On two occasions Paul tells others that he is making requests for them (Rom 1:10; Php 1:4). It is just that our requests should be limited by the criteria James imposed. "Ye ask, and

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receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." (Jas 4:3)

The Golden Rule, modified

The "Golden Rule" says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Lk 6:31 paraphrased) The next sentence of this prayer modifies that to say, "As you do unto others, so God will do unto you." If you want God's mercy, be merciful. If you want forgiveness, forgive. If you want God's wrath, be wrathful.

Jesus not only teaches us to ask for forgiveness, but in the same sentence teaches us to give it. God is a just God. Even when his justice is tempered with mercy he is just in his mercy. God's grace is available in unlimited supply, but only if we let it flow through us. We are not cisterns of God's grace, but pumping stations. If we are dams, we will be damned.

In Matthew's account of the giving of this prayer the only commentary on any of it is concerning this line. After all is said and done, Jesus says, the thing you need to remember about prayer is that "what goes around comes around." Even after praising God and asking about spiritual and physical things, and even though those prayers may be answered, the really important request is contingent on our being forgiving people.

There are one or two more phrases to this prayer, depending on which translation you use. Lord willing, next month's issue will complete the analysis of the Lord's prayer.

The Promise

There is a comforting promise in Mark 14:7. Some people may see it as a threat, or at best a mere statement of fact. It may, however, be seen as a promise.

A woman (John tells us it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus) came to Jesus as he ate in the house of Simon the Leper. She broke open an expensive vial of ointment and put it on the head and feet of Jesus. The disciples, most notably Judas bar Simon of Kerioth, complained that she should have sold it and given the money to the poor. Of course, the poor man Judas wanted it given to was Judas. Jesus answered with the promise. “Ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always.” No, the promise is not the second clause, but the first—“you have the poor with you always.”

What, you may ask, is so comforting about that? It certainly can't be comforting to those poor that he is talking about. To the rest of us it is only comforting because we know we aren't among them. What else is there to the Lord's words?

Here is the comfort, that God doesn't waste his commands. God doesn't tell us to do something, and then prevent us from doing it. If his *mitzvot*, his commands are for our benefit then he makes sure we are able to benefit. There may be great comfort in that, because it shows that God is not purely arbitrary. He doesn't make commands just to make commands. He doesn't lay down the law just to watch us squirm. He cares about us.

How do we know this? He promises that we will always have opportunity to give to the poor.

“Whenever you want you may do good to them.” We may not be able to do good to Jesus directly, as Mary did. Instead we have the poor to help. “Inasmuch as ye have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done unto me.” (Matt 25:40) We can do as much as Mary did, and more, because we will always have the opportunity.

So much is written about giving alms/charity. We were “created for good works.” (Eph 2:10) It is so much a part of our make-up that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35) In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.” (Lk 6:30) We are to be generous even to those whose desperation leads them to stealing from us.

If giving charity is such an important command, if it something that is so important to our spiritual welfare, then it is nice to know that God promises we will always have the opportunity for it. Since God commands it of us, it is comforting to know that he will always give us the opportunity to fulfill his command.

Of course, I am not proposing that God necessarily picks certain people to be poor just for the benefit of the few who have. After all, poor is really a relative term. Was not the widow commended for her giving (Mark 12:42-44), even though she was what almost everyone would call poor? No, God does not make people poor. But maybe sometimes he wonders why some people think they are among the poor. Sometimes, maybe, the passage should read, “The poorER you will have with you always.”

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