

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#29—Theology Proper—Part VIII¹
The Prayer Ministry Within the Holy Trinity

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For studies in theology proper, if you have the book, you should read Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. The table entitled "Topics and Readings for Theology Proper" includes Reymond's book along with the two books of charts by Wayne House and associates readings with the study topics. The next study will be on the relation of God to his creation.

One of the most neglected doctrines of Scripture is that the incarnate Son of God and the Holy Spirit are engaged in an unceasing ministry of prayer to the Father for God's children while they are on this earth. When we see how central this is to God's plan of salvation and how far-reaching it is, we should be led to greater thanksgiving—living in the knowledge of the active, regular, unfelt, dependable prayer work of the Son and Spirit.

You are so important to God that the three Persons of the Trinity have established a prayer ministry to protect you until you are in God's presence.

1. The basis for all intercession for us is God's purpose to place those He has chosen under the Cross work of Christ and bring them through this life and into His presence without fail. This goal is taught in John 13:1; 17:1, 24, among other places:

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ²For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

The purpose of Jesus' death on the Cross was to provide reconciliation, propitiation and redemption for the elect—those that God has chosen to enjoy eternity with Him. This is particular redemption or limited atonement. Jesus' death was designed to provide access to God for certain, i.e., 'particular,' individuals. Jesus' prayer life before the Cross (as shown in these passages) and after the Cross (in the points below) is an extension of what He did on the Cross. It does not add to what He did on the Cross, but instead makes sure that His death, burial and resurrection are continuously and unfailingly applied to those who are the objects of salvation. Because He is God, what He does, including His praying, will not fail to attain its goal.

There is absolutely no biblical teaching that Jesus prays for the non-elect (Jn. 17:9: "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours"). He does not pray that the Father would bless them and He does not pray that the Father would save them. His saving work is entirely focused on bringing those that God has chosen into God's presence.

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2. The Spirit provides unseen assistance for our deepest needs during this life. Paul teaches this in Rom. 8:26-27:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

This ministry goes beyond what we are able to pray for and is so magnificent that it cannot be described in human words. It is part of the Spirit's comforting ministry to us in support of the Son's work as the Head of the Body of Christ and shows that the Trinity does not leave us on our own to get through this life. We do not know what the Spirit prays for and we do not know what He says to the Father.

3. The Son continually intercedes on the basis of His Cross work to keep any power from snatching us from God's hand. Here is Rom. 8:31-34:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

We easily forget that there are demonic hosts that hate us because they hate the Lord Jesus Christ. The continual intercession of the Son protects us from unseen attacks designed to break our union with Christ. Notice that this intercession and that of the Spirit in v. 27 occur in the same chapter in the Bible.

4. The Son intercedes to protect us from damage by Satan and the world. Notice particularly the underlined portions of Jn. 17:6-19:

⁶ I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

¹³ I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

This is a sheltering ministry that protects us from the hostile forces around us, most of which we are unaware of. It is part of the guarantee that we will reach the presence of God. We are only dimly aware of the great conflicts within the spiritual realm as demonic forces attempt to thwart God's plan. Notice that 'world' here refers to non-believers (v. 9) and to the inhabited earth (vv. 11, 14-18).

5. The Son's intercession helps us before we sin, at the point of temptation, as taught in Heb. 2:18 and 4:14-16:

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

This is an amazing ministry in which the Son responds to our cries at the point of temptation and strengthens us to restrain from sin. Sin and temptation are not the same thing and are separated in time (Jas. 1:14-15). Jesus' work is available at the point of temptation before we sin. It is part of His work as our Great High Priest. The strengthening must involve His bringing His access-providing work before the Father in order that we might "find grace to help us in our time of need."

6. The Son's intercession helps us after we sin, to restore us to fellowship, as seen in 1 Jn. 2:1-2:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

The Son speaks to the Father "in our defense," applying His work on the Cross to our situation so that we can be restored to fellowship. We should not think that this verse suggests that the Father would remove our salvation if the Son did not intercede for us. There is no possibility that the Father would reject us eternally. Instead, this verse—like the whole book of 1 John—is about fellowship. The verse is about our walk with God, not our position in Christ. But our walk is based on our position: Jesus' atoning work guarantees that the elect will not fail to reach heaven, so Jesus' cleansing work in this passage is based on his atoning work on the Cross that includes sins committed prior to salvation and sins committed after salvation.

People often object to particular redemption on the basis of 1 Jn. 2:2: 'the sins of the whole world.' If we take this to mean that Jesus' death provided atonement (propitiation—the turning away of God's wrath) for everyone who ever lives on the earth, then either everyone would have to be saved or Jesus' work must have been ineffective. Indeed, Jn. 10:1-30 teaches that the sheep that Jesus prays for (as we saw above) are also the ones that Jesus died for. Notice that 'sheep' in this passage must refer to those who are saved and cannot refer to any other group (see v. 28). The fact that Jesus teaches particular redemption in this passage is incontrovertible. The underlining in the following is mine.

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.² The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.⁸ All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

¹⁹ At these words the Jews were again divided. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

²¹ But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

²² Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

²⁵ Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

In the light of this clear teaching we have to conclude that ‘world’ in 1 Jn. 2:2 must refer to a subset of humanity and not everyone who ever lives. This limited use of ‘world’ in the NT is frequent. ‘World’ in 1 Jn. 2:2 must refer to the elect but in Jn. 17 it refers to the unsaved or the whole earth. So John is saying that Jesus atoned for the sins of his readers and for all other believers—a refutation of any thinking that Jesus’ death would atone for the sins of some believers and some other means of reaching God would avail for the rest.

7. The Son intercedes to bring about unity among believers, as we see in Jn. 17:20-23:

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

It so important for the children of God who live on this earth at any one time to demonstrate the unity of the Father and Son through unity in the Body of Christ. Maintaining it is a significant part of the prayer life of the Son.

8. The Son intercedes to take us fully to our heavenly destination. Here is Heb. 7:23-25:

²³ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely (‘all the way to the end’) those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Because of the resurrection, Jesus holds His priesthood forever. It cannot and will not stop. He continually brings His priestly sacrifice on the Cross before the Father. See also Heb. 8:1-2 and 9:24, where 'heaven,' 'the true tabernacle' and 'the sanctuary' are the *relationship* between the Father and Son in which the Son now continually presents His Cross-work to the Father, and the Father responds with approval.

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.

²⁴ For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.

I do not understand very much about this, in part because the Bible does not tell us very much about how this actually happens. What I do know is that there are infinite issues here and I am the beneficiary of them.

Practical Conclusions

- We should be encouraged to trust God more because this ministry guarantees spiritual victory and eternal blessing.
- We are careless not only in talking about prayer, but also about carrying it out. Such concepts as "saying a prayer," "shooting a few words up to God" and "maybe He'll answer" may betray what we actually believe about prayer. Understanding and appreciating the prayer work of the Son and the Spirit is an excellent antidote to this.
- "Intercession" means stepping in for someone else. The Son and the Spirit do this for believers and they do it without being asked. None of these ministries is something we can request or need to request (except the one related to temptation; even then, the ministry of the Son occurs as we cry out to Him). They are done for us as part of grace.
- The intercession of the Spirit and the Son to the Father do not in any way involve overcoming the anger or hostility of the Father toward a believer. His hostility toward believers was turned away at the Cross. Rather, the intercession consists of requests to a holy and justice-demanding Father to give grace to His children on the basis of the Son's work on the Cross. As the Father was pleased with the Son's obedience up to the point of His baptism (Mt. 3:17: "I have taken great pleasure in Him."), He is now pleased with the Son's completed obedience in space and time to the point of His sacrifice on the Cross.
- We should be amazed that the Trinity would carry out this work for sinners such as we are. While there are many things we cannot understand about this, we are told enough to make us react with praise.

Study questions

1. What does the prayer ministry of the Trinity tell us about our Triune God?
2. Why is the praying of the Son effective?
3. What would happen if the Son prayed for the non-elect? Is this a possibility?
4. What does the Son do when He prays for believers in Rom. 8?
5. What does it mean for the prayer ministry of the Son and the Spirit to be continual?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.