

# 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

MAY 6, 2013

## DOES GOD REALLY RESPOND TO MY PRAYERS?

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(I am deeply indebted to Leopoldo Sanchez' thoughts on prayer and particularly on Jesus' prayer life and what it had in common with our own – see his article in Concordia Journal, 2006, pp)

### **Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27**

#### **The New Jerusalem**

**9** Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." **10** And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, **11** having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. **12** It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— **13** on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. **14** And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

**21** And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

**22** And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, **25** and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

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A one-way ticket to Mars - it sounds unlikely. But just a couple of weeks ago a company called Mars One began accepting applications, and people from all over the world are applying for the chance to go and live on Mars. Mars One says it intends to send four people to the Red Planet in 2023 to live there permanently.

Can't wait for 2023? Well, you can feel like a real space explorer with the help of Deep Space Communications Network. They advertise that they will transmit your personal message to a *place where there are no satellites*. With their state of the art satellite broadcasting technology, you can send either an audio message or a video message into deep space. Then, sit back and wait for a reply - all for only \$299. For which you receive also a certificate suitable for framing. It confirms that your message was sent to a *place where there are no satellites*, signed by the transmission engineer himself.

Wouldn't it be nice if the Holy Spirit would send us written confirmation every time we pray? You know, just something to tell us that our prayers have indeed been sent? That they're not just floating around in space in a *place where there are no satellites*.

A *place where there are no prayers* is what John writes about at the end of Revelation. It's a place where there are no prayers, because it's a place where there is no temple. There are no places of worship there at all, because God lives there. John says, "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty." (Revelation 21:22)

This is the place that is given the same name in Revelation as it's given in the Hebrew Scriptures: the "new heavens and the new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1). In both Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21, the new heavens and the new earth are described so that they sound like a return to the Garden of Eden, where prayer was unnecessary. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve could just speak to God, converse with God, as He walked with them in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8).

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Very few people have spoken to God in that way since the fall into sin. Yet, this is your hope that someday this is how your story will end, with you dwelling in that new heavens and new earth, able to speak to God without worry or distrust.

Until then, there are changes to the present chapters of your story that you pray for, and for your loved ones. You pray for something different to happen, as when Hannah prayed that the Lord would end her barrenness and give her a child (1Samuel 1:11-20), or as when King Hezekiah prayed for the Lord to change His mind and spare Hezekiah's life (Isaiah 38:1-5).

It's like when a movie director wants changes in a script that is not working out. How often a movie turns out differently than the book it's based on! Why? Because the director or the producer believed the original story could be improved upon! You want improvements, too. You pray at times for a different outcome, a better outcome than the one that looks like is going to happen.

Or, you worry that such a prayer won't do any good. When you pray for forgiveness or for God's will to be done, you expect His answer to be "Yes!" It's when you pray for your child, or pray for someone's physical healing, or pray for the healing of a broken relationship, or pray for a new job that you're unsure how God will answer. That's also when it can seem that there is no reply. That your prayer is no different than sending a message into deep space, and you're just about as likely to receive a reply to one as the other. That's when it can seem that your prayers are merely floating off into that place where there are no satellites. That's when *your life can become a place where there are no prayers*. And when you can feel bogged down in the details of your own story, deathly tired of yourself, and even of God. And wondering, "Does God really respond to my prayers?"

Jesus taught his disciples that God responds to prayer. "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father *in my name*, He will give it to you." (John 16:23) Well, it's one thing to teach others to pray – it is another to do it oneself! The same night he spoke those words, Jesus himself prayed in a garden a bit different than the Garden of Eden. Yes, he prayed that God's will be done, but before that he prayed for a change in his story. He prayed for a different outcome than the one toward which he was

heading, namely his death. "Abba Father, remove this cup from me." (Mark 14:36) How did he not say to himself, "I'm not going to pray about this, because God already knows what's going to happen to me"? Or, "I must pray, because what if I didn't pray and God was simply waiting on my prayer before taking action?" Or, "I wonder if what I am praying is really God's will." Or, "Why pray for this when God is not going to really respond?" How did Jesus bring himself to pray that night?

It was the work of the Holy Spirit. (Isaiah 63:10-11, 61:1-3) In Luke chapter three, we're told "the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus" at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22). In Luke chapter four, it says that "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the desert where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." (Luke 4:1-2) In Luke chapter five, it says that Jesus in the midst of healing people from their sicknesses "often withdrew to deserted places and prayed." (Luke 5:16)

Someone has raised the question, "Could the same Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the desert to be tempted also have led Him into the desert to pray? Led Him not only to wrestle with the devil but also to wrestle with God's will, in a tragic world surrounded by sickness and pain and death?" (Sanchez) In the desert those forty days, Jesus struggled with Satan. And the Son's faithfulness to his Father was put to the test: "If you are the Son of God..." the devil challenged Jesus. But in the Garden of Gethsemane is where the most intense struggle with Satan took place and where Jesus struggled most with God's will. It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus to take that struggle to the Lord in prayer, without worry, even in his worst hour of struggle: "Remove this cup from me." And it was the Holy Spirit who enabled Jesus to still call upon God as his father in trust: "Abba Father, remove this cup from me."

That same Holy Spirit is given to you. As Paul writes: "But when the time arrived that had been set by God, God sent His Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of Covenant Law so that he might redeem those who stand condemned by that Law. Thus we have received the full rights of heirs of the new heavens and the new earth.

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Because you are heirs, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba Father.'" (Galatians 4:4-6) This is indeed a Gospel promise, because in the midst of struggle and pain, in the fatigue of waiting for the new heavens and new earth, we do not always know how or what to pray. It doesn't matter. God's Spirit has been given to you and leads you to take your struggle to the Lord in prayer. He enables you to trust God as your Abba Father. And sometimes the Holy Spirit does your praying for you, making prayer out of your wordless sighs, praying for you, "Abba Father." (Romans 8:26; Galatians 4:6)

Amen!