

Intercession: the Prayer of Our Lord

REFERENCES

1. Study Bible (Life Application Study Bible)
2. Ten Concepts- H.H. Pope Shenouda
3. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240213.htm> homilies of St John Chrysostom on Hebrews
4. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701104.htm> tractates of St Augustine on the gospel of John

MEMORY VERSES

John 17:3,11 “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent...Holy Father keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are”

I John 2:1 “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”

MAIN POINTS

- the meaning of intercession
- the significance of intercession in our lives
- the context and purpose of the Lords Intercession
- the Lords intercession- for Himself, His disciples and future believers

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR THE SERVANT(S)

Read up on the Intercessory Prayer of the Lord Jesus in the gospel of St John, chapter 17 and also possibly other material on the power of intercession; including the intercession of Lord Jesus on behalf of believers as mentioned in Hebrews 7, a beautiful chapter written by Paul to the Hebrews who were returning to Jewish customs, relying upon the intercession of the earthly high priest, not realising the Lord’s role as Advocate (also I John 2:1). Also homilies by the early church fathers on these subjects- there a few links above.

ACTIVITY

Brainstorm what they think intercession means? Who can intercede on behalf of us? Where it if mentioned in the mass? Personal experiences of intercession through the saints. This is flexible and can be done as a class or in pairs or small groups who then share their ideas with the rest of the class.

INTRODUCTION

First read the chapter John 17 with the prayer versus 1-26 and then mention the events that happened beforehand in previous chapters where the Lord speaks comfort to His disciples and warns them of things to come in chapter 14, the coming of the Holy Spirit (14:26, 15:26), the importance of Abiding in Him (15:4), the Lord’s call for His disciples to be separate from the world (15:18) as friends of His and not only servants (15:15-16), the amazing expression of His love for His disciples in laying down His life (15:13) followed by the Holy Spirits work in chapter 16 and the power of Praying in the Lord’s Name. It is significant that the Lord first tells them first to pray through His Name (meaning not only ‘we pray through the Name of the Lord Jesus’ but the very nature of praying through His power) before He Himself prays for them in chapter 17 of Johns gospel.

THE LESSON

(1) What is the meant by ‘intercession’

Intercession is to pray to God on behalf of another:

- a. The practice of intercession occurs in many denominations yet with slight variation. For example within Islam some Muslims even believe in intercession (i.e. Tawassul)
- b. Within Christianity there are variations in the meaning given to the term:
 - i. *Protestants* however do not follow either of these practices and instead refer to intercession as to the prayer of one Christian for his fellow Christian. It is

generally by the living for the living. In some evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal sects however they believe the role of intercessor to be a divinely appointed spiritual gift or ministry where they are given the power to lift the burden off another, so that it is considered a deep spiritual experience only for those called to such. This is something we do not agree with. They do however look at intercession solely as the Advocacy of Christ (see This is in part based on Scriptural

- ii. *Catholics* agree with this intercession of the Saints in Heaven. They do however take it one step further in themselves praying on behalf of those who are in purgatory, for their reception into Heaven. We as Orthodox Christians do not agree with this practice
- iii. *Orthodox* believe in asking the faithful members of the Communion of Saints in Heaven to intercede to God on behalf of them and others.



By comparison, the orthodox faith considers intercession as an integral part in the church as it allows communion between the church here and now and that in heaven. Although she does give high esteem to the intercession of our holy Virgin Mother St Mary, as well as the saints, she does in no way disregard the intercession of the Lord Jesus. On the contrary the intercession of the Lord Himself takes its own place as the advocacy before the Father on behalf of all mankind. Our protestant brothers' look to several passages in Scripture as reasoning against the intercession of the saints while we would use the same verses to explain that the work of Christ was apart from the intercession of the saints here, and those departed. We place the intercession of the Lord in its own league as the H.H. Pope Shenouda says:

*The mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ is an atonement, which means that He mediates for the forgiveness of our sins, being the **Atoner** who paid our debts on our behalf. His mediation means that He says to the Father: "Do not count their transgressions because I*

*have carried their iniquity" (Is.53: 6). Thus He stands as a Mediator between God and man; or rather, He is the **only Mediator** between God and men; He fulfilled God's Divine Justice and granted people the forgiveness of sins, by dying for them. This is what St. John the Apostle meant when he said: "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation (meaning to reconcile or atone for sin) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1John.2: 1,2). Here, the atoning mediation is very clear. It is mediation for the sinner: "If anyone sins" and this sinner needs atonement. The only One who offered this atonement was Jesus Christ the righteous. Hence He can mediate for us through His blood which was shed for us.*

Our Protestant brethren reject intercessions of the Virgin Mary or of the angels or of the saints they base their rejection on Saint John the Apostle: "... we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1John.2: 1) and the words of the Apostle Paul: "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1Tim.2: 5), when in fact there is a fundamental difference between the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ and the intercessions of the saints, while the intercession of the saints are of the pleading type, since they pray for us, which is completely different to Christ's atoning mediation.

It is very important therefore to make the distinction and to understand what it is exactly that the church teaches on such matters as it is supported by scripture, the teachings of the early church and experience over time. For what a blessing it is that we ask the prayers of those who have completed the race for this is sanctioned by the Holy Bible which says: "...pray for one another" (James 5: 16). For the saints including the apostle St Paul asked the saints of those whom he served such as in Thessalonians where he says "...pray for us" (2Thess 3: 1), in Hebrews the same request to "pray for us" (Heb 13:18) and again in Ephesians we read the beautiful passage "...praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints – and for me" (Eph 6: 18-19). It is all through scripture!! So if we are ask our lay brother or sister to pray for us in time of trouble or weakness, how much more ought we to ask the prayers of those who have completed their striving and departed to the Heavenly Paradise with Christ? If we ask the prayers of human beings, is it too much to ask the prayers of the angels?

There are examples all through scripture of intercession of living saints on behalf of the people, for example the intercession of Moses for the people of Israel. God willed to destroy the people because they worshipped the golden calf. Yet He did not do it directly but revealed the matter to Moses the Prophet as if giving him the opportunity to intercede on behalf of the people and what's more the Lord accepted his intercession as we read (in Exo32: 7-14) "So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people". In the same way that Abraham cried out to God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, in saying "Far be it from You" Moses also pleaded with the Lord saying "*Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own seed*". We see here that God indeed values the prayers of his people for one another and for sinners.

The departed however find the greater favour with God and so their prayers go straight to the heart of God. It appears through records of miracles and through Scripture that the prayers of the departed have greater favour with God to the extent that without their prayers, the Lord shows mercy on people for their sake. How much more then if they do pray for us? We see this in the time of David's descendants where the merciful and compassionate works God were seen for the sake of His servant David. When Solomon transgressed against God, He decided to tear the kingdom of Israel away from him, yet before so-doing He said "*Nevertheless I will not do it in your days, for the sake of your father David; but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However I will not tear away the whole kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son for the sake of My servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen*" (1Kin. 11: 12,13).

So if David has such favour with God, how much more the Virgin Mary, the angels, John the Baptist who is the greatest born of women, and the martyrs who tasted death for the sake of the Lord?

(2) The context and purpose of the Lord's Intercession

- a. From the previous chapter the Lord says "these things I have spoken to you that you may have peace" (John16:33) in the world where there is so much tribulation which shows us how our peace is apart from circumstance. The Lord does at no time promise to lift the burden but rather offers His peace and strength to sustain in time of need. A peace which is "not as the world shall give". He promises the greatest comfort of all to His disciples (both the twelve and all who would believe on Him, including us) and reassures them in the final part of the chapter in saying "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" proving His authority and power. By contrast almost, the Lord in the next verse (beginning chapter 17) to plead to the Father. He starts by praying for Himself, then His disciples and finally the future believers as will be later discussed. In the chapter following the Lords prayer of Intercession for all mankind, we read of the His humble start on the way to Calvary with the betrayal.

- b. The very purpose of the prayer as St Augustine puts it:

'The Lord, the Only-Begotten and co-eternal with the Father, could in the form of a servant and out of a servant, if such was needful, pray in silence; but in this other way (i.e. praying audibly to the Father in the midst of His disciples, see 17:1) He wished to show Himself as one who prayed to the Father, that we might remember that He was still our Teacher. Accordingly, the prayer which He offered for us He made known to us; seeing that it is not only the delivering of discourses to them by so great a Master, but also the praying for them to the Father, that is a means of edification to the disciples. And if so to those who were present to hear what was said it is certainly so also to us who were to have the reading of it when written'. In so-doing, the Lord also showed us how we too ought to pray to the Father, and to intercede for one another (as in Matt 6:9-15 with the Lord's prayer).

(3) The Lords intercession- for Himself, His disciples and future believers

The entire chapter comprises of Jesus' prayer to the Father where He draws on what eternal life means v1-3, He shows that He had glorified the Father by fulfilling His will upon earth, and revealing Him to His disciples' v4-8. He then prays for them, that they may be preserved in unity and kept from evil v9-16 and prays for their sanctification v17-19. He prays also for those who should believe on Him through their preaching, that they all might be brought to the state of unity, and finally brought to eternal glory v20-26.

- i. The Lord prays for Himself: here first the Lord addresses the Divine nature as He speaks in His humility (being fully man and fully God yet speaking to the all Divine Father God). "Glorify Thy Son" this is very significant since it was important that His Jewish disciples acknowledge Him as the promised Messiah, as well as the universal Saviour of the Gentile world. In so saying "the hour has come, glorify Thy Son" we see the Divine will which at all times, and in every occasion when He did anything or suffered anything to be done, were arranged by Him who was subject to no time; since those things which were future in point of time have their efficient causes in the wisdom of God, wherein there are no distinctions in time. So let it not be supposed that this hour came out of any point of urgency but rather by Divine appointment. See Gal 4:4 "but when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son".

It was no necessary law of the heavenly bodies that tied to its time the Passion of our Lord for how could one ever consider that the stars should compel their Maker to die!! "...that Thy Son may Glorify Thee" explains that by the Lords death on the cross and His resurrection to the Majesty on High was to be the means of the Lord being glorified. For had the Lord not died, He would not have risen from the dead. Humility is the earning of Glory; glory, the reward of humility. This, however, was done in the form of a servant; but He was always in the form of God; and always shall His glory continue. For it was not in the past as though it were no more in the present, nor shall it be, but without beginning and without end, His glory is everlasting and without end! Augustine ponders 'was it that God the Father likewise endured the humiliation of the body or of suffering, out of which He need be raised to glory? In not, how then was the Son to glorify Him, whose eternal glory could neither appear diminished through human form, nor be enlarged in the divine?'

We go onto to then see how the Lord speaks with the Father as if clarifying His authority over creation, before His disciples, "...as You have given Him authority over all flesh..." in v2 which is followed by the purpose of the Lord being on the earth which was "that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him". But what does it mean to have eternal life one may say? Well here the Lord Himself says "and this is eternal life, that they (that is we believers) may know You, the only True God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent". So we see that eternal life in fact begins when the faithful believer comes to this knowledge of the Lord; knowledge not only of the intellect (as to know that for e.g. other planets something exists) but to know by association and to live in constant

communion with the One God who is knowable and desires to be known; knowledge of the Most High which leads one to repentance and purity of heart. A knowledge which will be complete upon the passing away of this world, and the sin and death therein “and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (II Thess 4:17) as Apostle St Paul writes.

May we say therefore with the Apostle St Paul “that I may know Him and the Power of His Resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if by any means I may attain to the resurrection of the dead” Phil 3:10-11. We ought always to be prepared and so reoccupied with the day of the Lord when He shall descend with a shout to take us to glory.

- ii. The Lord then prays for His disciples that they may receive the word and believe and so minister it to others. A very beautiful verse appears here when the Lord prays for the unity of the church. “Holy Father, keep through Your Name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as we are” v11. What an amazing thought that the Lord prayed for such **unity** to be found in His body, the church that it may be “as” the unity within the Holy Trinity! We read this in the morning service “...endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” Eph 4:3 which proves that the Lord has already instituted this unity so it is up to us to maintain the bond of peace through prayer and fellowship of the Spirit, even in the face of opposition in the world (v14). We see the importance of this as the Lord prays in ‘the Name’ of the Father that there be no schism in the body, but rather a perfect harmony with every person fulfilling his role as an integral member in the body of Christ (whether the hidden or private parts as Paul speaks of in his epistles); the church!!
- iii. Finally the Lord prays for future believers “I do not pray for these alone (the disciples) but also for those who will believe on their word; that they may be one, as You, Father and I are in Me and I in You; that they also may be One in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (v20-21). So what does the Lord pray for the believers here but the greatest of blessings with unity, peace, love and eternal glory! We see this fulfilled in the first Christians in Acts 4:32 “now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul...they had all things in common” and so we too ought to have this unity of Spirit which comes only from the Hands of the Lord. Finally the Lord ends His prayer with a request for the bond of love “which is the bond of perfection” (II Cor 3:14) in saying “that the love with which you have loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (v26)

Contemplation: As Christ according to His human nature was called the Son of God, he may be understood as saying: ‘I have communicated to all those who believe in Me, the glorious privilege of becoming sons of God; that, being all adopted children of the same Father, they may abide in peace, love and unity. So for this reason it is said in Heb 2:11 ‘He is not ashamed to call them brethren’.

CONCLUSION

- Intercession is an integral part of prayer and ought not to be overlooked. The intercessions of the saints are powerful and so we ought to seek their prayers as we do of one another
- The Lord’s prayer shows us how He stands as not only intercessor but Advocate before the Father, having been nailed to the cross of Calvary in my stead
- This prayer is a source of peace and comfort. It also shows us that in the midst of any difficult time or decision, we ought to get alone with the Lord and pour our hearts out before Him just as Hanna did, not only on behalf of ourselves but our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ