

## **Part III**

### **Prayer- The Act of Atonement.**

## **Preface**

In the preceding two parts, we have considered Job and his sufferings and the theological perspectives on these. In difficulties and crises situations, the only solution or the only method to survive the situation is prayer. Without prayer, we cannot overcome any obstacle. Job teaches us this in that he survived his inordinate difficulties by standing close to God through constant contact. This is not the only lesson that we learn from Job. He demonstrates how exalted and transformed his spiritual perception becomes after his sufferings compared to what it was before. Previously, as Job himself confesses, he had only heard of God. But in the end Job says that 'I have seen God with my own eyes'. Through these words a new experience flows out to his listeners. The ecstasy of the experience is reflected in his words.

## Chapter 9

### What is prayer?.

What is prayer? Why should we pray? How should we pray? The Fathers teach us that prayer is like breathing. Can we live without breathing/ respiration? In the process of breathing, the air enters our lungs and oxygen is absorbed into our blood vessels while carbon-di-oxide is expelled, thus purifying our blood. If breathing stops, what happens to life? Does not life end? When we are relaxed and are sitting effortlessly or lying down, our breath is also relaxed and slow. However, when we are engaged in activities that call for physical effort, the rate of our respiration also goes up. In this manner, when we engage in constant effort, we need to experience more intimacy with God. That is, when we are more active, we must also engage more in prayer. The Holy Saint, Parumala Thirumeni accomplished ten times more spiritual and social work than what an ordinary man could possibly do in a lifetime. The reason for this is what we explained before.

#### **a) Pouring out your heart before God.**

Hannah, the mother of Prophet Samuel was extremely unhappy because she did not have children. Even the loving concern of her husband Elkanah did not mitigate her sorrow. Elkanah had another wife named Peninnah. She had children. Her insults and barbed words often increased Hannah's grief. Every year they used to visit the Temple as a family. That particular year, after offering sacrifices, Hannah was praying alone. The High Priest Eli, seeing her mouth move without sound, thought that she must be drunk and reprimands her. In reply Hannah says, *,"Do not take your servant for a wicked woman I was pouring out my soul to the Lord".*

This is the most important among the many aspects of prayer. Silent prayer is laying down your heart before God. When silent prayers arise from the depths of the heart, even a sigh can get an answer. Eli, the High Priest speaks with the authority of his Office and blesses her. *"May God grant you your petition"*. We read that thereafter her countenance was no longer sad. Here we see the firmness of faith in both the one who blessed and the one

who received it. This is the main feature that should be there in our prayers also. Hanna's heartfelt prayer and tears were accepted by God. God considered her tears to her credit. Hannah did not pray that her son would become king, but still, he ordained two kings. He was also a powerful prophet.

The basic components of prayer.

1. The conviction that what we ask for is essential.
2. The conviction that I will get the answer if I ask my Lord.
3. The divine voice of the mediating High Priest.

St, Paul prayed for the thorn in his flesh to be removed only three times. He was satisfied with the answer that he received. The prayer of the Lord on the night of the Passion is also an example. He prayed three times for the cup to pass from Him. God sends an angel to strengthen him. After this we see the Lord rise up with renewed strength and says, *'Rise, let us be going'*.

**b) Quick Prayer/ Ejaculatory Prayer.**

*'Lord! Have mercy upon me!'* is the chief among such prayers. It is to be prayed as if we are inhaling oxygen into our lungs. What happens if we do not do this? We will be filled with polluted air. Similarly unnecessary thoughts would affect our spiritual body. It is through such private prayers and quick prayers that we should pray for those who seek prayers from us and also for those for whom it is our duty to pray. However, if we pray aloud, it becomes a way to show off.

**c) Public Prayer as a Community.**

The yardstick for such prayers is the Lord's Prayer beginning 'Our Father' and the High Priestly Prayer is the Gospel of John Chapter 17. These contain lessons and canons of faith. Subjects that concern us as a community must be brought in prayer in the community. We must pray for the Church, society and the Country before God. The extravagance in gestures and sound, for impressing people does not impress the Lord. It is wrong to publish portions of the Holy Qurbana service as 'The divine voice

of X or Y'. That is forming the fan club of a star and not the worship of the Lord.

What we must always remember, be it public/ corporate prayer, private prayer or ejaculatory prayer, are the directions of the Lord. We must not forget the parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. The Pharisee was a good man and had lived a good life. He came as a contented person before the Lord. He did not want anything from the Lord.

#### **d) The Father who is aware of your needs**

We must not consider prayer or offerings to be a shopping list to present our various needs or wishes before the Lord because prayer is actually a way to strengthen the loving relationship with God. John 17:21 says, '*--that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us,*'. For this to be realized, we must become holy. Now-a-days some grown up children, children in and beyond their teens, talk to their father or mother only to get some need satisfied by them. Some refer to their fathers as 'ATM'. May be it is a joke. But we must remember that parents are to be addressed with respect and not through derogatory words. We must not look at God and prayer as a place to get our desires fulfilled.

Some people seek the aid of the occult and other demonic sources to get their desires fulfilled easily. I have heard of some of our faithful following such means. They are not faithful, they are unfaithful. Their action is like that of certain teenagers who get entrapped by mafia groups in their attempt to earn easy money that their parents had refused them. Our Lord has declared, "*-your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.* " (Matt 6:8)

#### **e) Intercession before God.'**

Just as we are aware of our own needs, we must sympathise with the needs of others. We must also present these before God. The example of Patriarch Abraham praying for other people and other countries before asking anything for himself is an example. For this very reason he is known as '*the*

*friend of the Lord*'. The Lord indicates the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with the introduction, "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?*" Even though the people of Sodom were evil and engaged in Sodomy, and had harassed his nephew Lot and his family, Abraham intercedes for Sodom. The Mother of our Lord tells her son that the wine had run out when she comes to hear of the matter. She did not do it at the behest of the family that had arranged the feast. Just as the fragrance of certain oils cling to the hands and body of those who handle it, the fragrance, blessings and holiness will be evident in those who intercede for others, It is then that we become the image of God.

When we escape selfishness, arrogance, evil desires and such that corrupt the image of God in us, our prayers become according to the will of God. God has created our being or called us into light from darkness to be the bearers of His virtue. As said in the **Taksa** of the Holy Qurbana, the grace and Mercy of God must come into us, fill us up and flow outward. It must flow not only to fellow beings but also to the entire nature. There is an abundant outpouring of blessings from the tomb of the Holy Parumala Thirumeni because of the abundance of God's radiance/glory here. Such people can alter the reality before our eyes. The miraculous power of the bones of Prophet Elisha is proof of this. (2 Kings 13:20-21) The leprosy ridden skin of Naaman was changed to the tender and clear skin such as that of a young boy by Elisha because of this radiance of God.

**f) The entire body of Christ is with us.**

We are never alone in prayer. When we pray, all members of the entire Body of Christ join us, and it includes those who are alive as well as those who have departed from us. A priest preparing for the Holy Qurbana remembers Mary the Mother of God, the Apostles, Fathers and Teachers, Martyrs, the Communion of Saints and the departed in the Promeon, Sedara at the beginning of the fourth Kauma of the prayers for the night. In short, the experience of Mount Tabor must be felt in worship.

**g) A spiritual talent that can be acquired.**

His Grace, Paulos Mar Gregorios Metropolitan says about prayer, 'Prayer is something that has to be learned. We can compare it to swimming. If someone pushes you into water, you will definitely sink to the bottom. Your perception itself would be that the law of gravity is ultimate and it is impossible to refute it. However, we must understand that there are other rules besides gravity. For example, the laws of buoyancy are connected to floating in water; similarly the laws of motion are connected to the mobility of a body. However, just by mastering all these laws you will not be able to swim. A person plunges into the water and through repeated practical training acquires the ability to float in water without sinking. He also acquires the skill to swim under water and also to swim forwards and backwards on the surface. The reason for some swimmers becoming more skilled than others is because they have made the effort to understand the rules better.'

As in the case of swimming, in prayer also the initial rules are similar; just because the first few efforts have not found success, we should not go back. Prayer is a spiritual skill. It has to be acquired through constant effort.

Real prayer is the outflow of a heart full of love and gratitude. When, after the Annunciation, the footsteps of the Mother of God fall at the entrance of Elizabeth's house, the baby leaps with joy in her womb-a moment when heaven had visited the earth. From the time God came down and resided in the womb of St. Mary, her womb became the Second Heaven. Worship flows from the heart of Elizabeth.

#### **h) Effort is necessary to learn to pray.**

Saying that one does not feel inclined to pray or that there is no use in prayer is foolish. We must control our physical lethargy. We must harness our will and bring it under control. It needs a little effort. After the initial effort there is a period of effortlessness. That is true meditation. Staying in that meditative state is true fulfilment. It is similar to the state of the infant sleeping at its mother's breast. Fasts, self-control, discipline etc. are meant for reaching this state. It was David's indolence that made him walk idly on the roof in the

evening instead of going for the appointed prayers. That prompts him to see what he should not have seen and do the forbidden. (2 Samuel 11:2)

It is good to have something for the eye to focus on during times of prayer. To have a space prepared for prayer is ideal. When the mind keeps wandering, repeat the prayer, 'My Lord, my attention is wandering, take charge of my wandering mind. Heal me in Thy Mercy'. When we pray this with a sincere heart several times, the mind will automatically become focussed. The Lord will forgive us.

### **i) Two important prayers.**

There are two important prayers that are connected to Our Lord. Let us consider these. It is these two prayers that our Fathers have relied on to form the order of our prayers. These prayers are deep in meaning, familiar to us and yet give us food for thought. The prayer, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" is the greatest prayer above all others.

### **1. The Lord's Prayer (St. Mathew 6:9-13)- Orthodox Jewish Bible**

This is meant for our use. We have named it 'The Lord's Prayer'. The prayer is addressed to the Father. Six topics are included in it. Though it is said that three are meant for heaven and three for us, all of these are actually meant for ourselves.

- i. Hallowed be Thy Name: Isn't the name of God Holy? Then what is the issue? It means that we should not cause His Name to be tarnished.
- ii. Thy Kingdom Come: The Lord says, "*The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.*" The true Kingdom of God will be established only when we are transformed individually and also as a society.
- iii. Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven: You might have heard of the story of a feast given by God to both the people of heaven and that of hell. The sweet payasam was made in a huge vessel and the people could sit around it and drink.



However there was one condition. They were given spoons with very long handles which were tied to their hands such that they could not bend their elbows. It was a state where no one could feed himself. Those in heaven fed each other and were contented. As for those in hell, each tried to feed himself and only succeeded in getting frustrated and dirty without getting even a drop into his mouth. Isn't the experience of the Kingdom of God escaping us because of our greed? The Kingdom of God is in the midst of those who care for each other. It should be the same within the family as well as society.

- iv. Give us this day our daily bread: The meaning of the name 'Bethlehem' is 'House of Bread'. To the Jews bread denotes peace and contentment.
- v. Forgive us our debts just as we forgive also our debtors: In the parable of ten thousand talents, the Lord says, "*My heavenly Father will also do the same to [every one of] you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.*" (Matthew 18:35- Amplified Bible). The words debt and sin are used in some versions. We owe certain duties to our parents and teachers. They will remain our debts for ever. We must ensure that this does not happen. Sin does not need any clarification.
- vi. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (the evil one). The Lord says the same thing in the High-priestly prayer. The evil one, i.e. the devil. The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Prophet Nahum warns us ,*'A destroyer has risen in front of your face'*.

The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory belong to God. We are called to live for the glory of His Name. This should be remembered by he who is the real image of God

## **2. The High-priestly Prayer.**

It is chapter 17 of the Gospel of John that is known as the High-priestly prayer.

In the thirteenth chapter, the getting together of Our Lord and His

disciples before the festival of *Pesach*/ Feast of the Passover, is recorded. In verses 26, 27, the Lord dips the bread and gives it to Judas Iscariot. It is also recorded that '*As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.*,' and '*As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.*'( verse 30). The rest of that chapter and in chapters 14, 15, 16, the Lord forewarns his disciples about what would happen to Him and also comforts and encourages them. He also promises that He would send the Paraclete / Ruach. St. John, who has not recorded many metaphors, records the metaphor of the vine and its branches in between.

As already said, the 17<sup>th</sup> Chapter begins in a manner that makes clear what the prayer is all about.'*After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:*' What is noteworthy about this prayer is that it is positioned just before Jesus faces a sequence of events that are extremely harsh and challenging. A disciple who betrays the teacher, a leading apostle who denies Him, the team of disciples who run away abandoning Him, the Lord is aware of all this and had foretold these to his disciples. We must note that in spite of all these, He does not pray dedicating these coming events before God. Today we enjoy and revel in prayers offered dedicating certain subjects.

One of the main subjects is the desire for the Glory of the Father's Name. For this purpose, it is requested that the Son should be glorified. Here we must call to mind the prayer, 'Hallowed be Thy Name'. Jesus and His companions have worked for the glory of the Father's Name. The word given by the Father has been imparted to the disciples who have conveyed it to the world. The Lord also prays for His disciples in general. He prays that those who have received His word should also become one like us.(all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you) In verse 15, He says, "*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*" He reminds us of this in the Lord's Prayer also. The Lord says, "*Sanctify them by the truth*". The Lord teaches us through this prayer that holiness is the greatest weapon. All powers tremble before

holiness. The head of the serpent shall be shattered. Where there is holiness, there shall not be excessive worldly thoughts. Verse 20 is for me and you. *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message."* The Lord's wish is that we should live holy lives according to the word of God. He says again, *'that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. "* (verse 23), These words are relevant. At the beginning of the prayers during the Elevation of the Holy Mysteries, the priest says, 'Holy mysteries, for the holy and the undefiled.' That is the declaration of the priest. Immediately the people respond "None is holy, save the One holy Father, the One holy son, and the One Holy spirit' followed by the priest "With us is the One Holy Father..... With us is the One Holy Son..... With us is the One living Holy Spirit". Amen. What is important is for us is to live in increasing holiness by remaining close to God in prayer, abandoning slothfulness.

#### **j) The Prayer of Solomon**

After completing the construction of the First Temple of Jerusalem as a splendid and marvellous construction that overshadowed all the other wonders of the world, King Solomon offers a prayer of dedication. During the consecration/dedication of all of our churches, portions from 1 Kings Chapter 8 are always read. It describes the purpose of establishing a church.

1. As a dwelling place for the Glory of God
2. The eyes, ears and heart of God will be open towards the Temple.
3. To help succeeding generations walk diligently in godly path and for the forgiveness of their sins.
4. So that the cries and prayers of His servant Solomon may be heard in heaven and answered.
5. So that the prayers and pleas of God's people, the Children of Israel are heard.
6. So that God responds to an unrepentant and unrighteous man according to his sin and the righteous according to his innocence.
7. When God's own people, Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against the Lord, and when

they turn back to God and pray and make supplication in the Temple, the Lord would hear from heaven and forgive their sin and answer them.

8. When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because the people have sinned against the Lord, when they turn from their sin and come to God, He shall hear from heaven and forgive their sin.
9. When famine or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers come to the land, in order to accept the repentance of the people and to release them from punishment.
10. When plague and epidemics strike, to hear the people's plea and to answer them.
11. When enemies besiege the land.
12. To answer from heaven all pleas made by every person with a broken heart and in repentance, for You alone know every human heart.
13. When a person of a different faith comes knocking at Your door, whether he is a citizen or a foreigner, so that their prayer is heard from heaven, and answered.
14. When people go to war against their enemies, and when they pray to the LORD coming near to Him, then to hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and grant them Grace.
15. When taken captive, if the people repent and plead with the Lord, to liberate them.

#### **k) Some Prayer Warriors in the Bible**

##### **1. Those who hopefully await the fulfilment of the promise of God.**

Even though Job lost everything and underwent severe trials, it did not weaken his faith nor make him lose his zeal. Elijah who was taken up in his body only offered one prayer after soaking the altar with water and filling up the trenches around it. *'Answer me O Lord!'* Just as Elijah believed, the fire descended from heaven and burnt up the altar and everything around it. Naaman, the commander of the armies of Syria is healed of his leprosy through the advice of the young maid brought captive to his household

from Israel. She is a girl who is a witness and an evangelist in the place where she is brought in captivity and confirms that a person can become a faithful witness to God in any circumstance.

God has a plan and a schedule for each event. Abraham, who understood this well awaited the fulfilment of the Lord's Promise with a faith that challenged belief. Zachariah and Elizabeth who remained righteous and obeyed the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly even though they were not blessed with children are our models. We must trust firmly in God like the friends of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who believed in the Lord's protection even when they were cast into the furnace. We must remember that the Lord will be with us as the Fourth, sprinkling cool mist into the furnace.

## **2. Those who pray with the conviction that their prayers will be answered.**

Our Lord's prayer at the tomb of Lazarus is as if His prayer has already been answered. In John 11:41 Then Jesus looked up and said, *"Father, I thank you that you have heard me."* Zacchaeus only wished to see the Lord, but his repentance and restitution resulted in the Lord becoming a guest in his home.

In the parable of the unjust judge, the judge extends help to the widow in spite of his being unjust because of the persistence of the widow who kept coming to him again and again asking for justice to be done. The Lord hears the prayers of those who are devoted to Him. Jacob takes hold of the angel who wrestled with him on the banks of the river insisting *"I will not let you go unless you bless me."* Here we see the possibilities in earnest prayer.

The Lord makes special mention of the Centurion's faith, *"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."* The Centurion says that a word from the Lord can heal his servant. The same faith is in the blind man. The Leper confirms, *"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."* The people of Gennesareth recognized the Lord. They believed that

even his shadow or the tassel of his garments could heal them. The blessings are poured out on gentiles as well. The woman with the issue of blood gets healed by touching the tassel of the Lord's robe. We ought to have the awareness and experience of the fact that the Lord is good.

### **3. Repentance and return/ homecoming through prayer.**

The prodigal son comes back to Him in soiled garments. He expected to be received as a servant. But what did he get? He was washed, bathed and made clean. New and fine garments and shoes and a ring for his fingers were given to him. He was received as a son and a feast was prepared for him. We have also been cleansed by the divine blood of the Lord. The stains and creases on us must be taken out. We must become fit to sit at the feet of the Lord like Mary. Isaiah who experienced the presence of the Lord confesses his inadequacy. But he is cleansed when the Seraph touches his tongue with the live coal from the altar and he hears the voice of the Lord. We must be able to have our sins forgiven and walk free, carrying our bed like the paralysed man. We must pray with humility like the tax collector. We must become as guileless as babies. When sins are forgiven a homecoming should follow.

### **4. A little effort is required to get to know God.'**

A story recorded by the Fathers deserves some attention. There was a King who was an atheist. He considered faith in God to be a superstition. However his Prime Minister was a devout man who believed in God. One day, inadvertently, he spent a little extra time in prayer. The King was angry that the Minister came late and asked for the reason. The Minister apologetically reported that he had taken a little extra time to pray. Then the King said, "God? Is there such a person? Show him to me". The King desired concrete evidence for everything. The Minister was silent and stood with bowed head. The King asked him to get out. "Bring back evidence of the presence of God in one week, or else you will be dismissed from your position" was the order of the King. The Minister

returned home sad. On the way back he met a boy who asked the Minister the reason for his troubled countenance. The Minister told him everything. The boy told him, "When you return to the palace, I will also come with you. I will be waiting for you exactly at this place".

On that day they reached the palace together. On the way the boy told the Minister, "When we get to the palace you must introduce me to the King. You must tell him that I am your teacher/ guru and that I shall answer any question that the King might have and also offer proof." This introduction astonished the King. However, he asked the boy, "Where can we see God?" The boy said 'He is here and everywhere around. There is no place where He is not.' "Then let me see Him", said the King. The boy told the king, "I require a glass of milk from which no butter has been removed". The milk was brought to him. The boy put his finger in the milk and stirred it. He did it carefully, from the top to the bottom. The King asked with some annoyance, "You have been searching for quite some time!" The boy returned, "I am searching for the butter in the milk". The King got angry. "To get butter, we must do some things first. The milk must be converted into curds, and then it has to be churned". The boy replied with a smile, "God is here everywhere, but to find him and to know him, some hard work is required: daily prayer, holy life, prostrations, fasts, vigils. The King is living without any problems because of the prayerful presence of this Minister with you. This Minister is aware of the presence of God in everything". After saying this boy disappeared. He was an angel of God sent to protect the Minister. Through this, God not only protected the Minister but also converted the King into a firm believer in God through the Minister. The Lord who saw the quandary of the Minister is living today also. He is near us as the helper and guard of His beloved people.