

ABSTRACT

A Philosophical Analysis of Petitionary Prayer

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In this paper, I present a philosophical analysis of petitionary prayer, from the perspective of one who engages in petitionary prayer on a regular basis. This paper looks at the basis for petitionary prayer from the Bible and some traditional thoughts and practices associated with it from the church. Primarily, this paper addresses those concerns that are raised against the practice of petitionary prayer. I call these “philosophical problems” with petitionary prayer. I address these three, the problem of free will/divine providence, the problem of hiddenness, and the problem of God’s goodness, all in relation to this practice of petitionary prayer. Through this paper, I hope to show that none of these are problems when addressed from the right context, through the grace of Jesus Christ. It is only by his grace that we can see the perfect light that is revealed in petitionary prayer.

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A Philosophical Analysis of Petitionary Prayer

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CHAPTER ONE

Petitionary Prayer and the Philosophical Mind: Two Schemas

Prayer is the substance of every believer's life. As such, I will begin with a prayer. And, truly, this is not so foreign to the academic discussion as one can see from the works of Augustine, Aquinas, and other such figures. They considered prayer an integral part of the intellectual and academic life.

Abba Father, I ask that you anoint this work with your protection and peace. I ask that you prepare this piece in your way and in your fashion. Already, so many words are written. I pray that you anoint every one of these words with your Spirit and cover it with your tranquility. May the hearers of this truly hear your Word. In the name of Yahshua, the Messiah.

In this paper, I will look at prayer through a particularly philosophical lens. I will not address prayer in general, but petitionary prayer in particular. I hope through this discussion to explain petitionary prayer in Christ's light and to lead us all to a greater appreciation of this great tool of our faith.

In this thesis, I will address philosophical problems concerning *the Christian practice of petitionary prayer*.¹ By petitionary prayer, I am referring to that Christian practice of asking God for particular things. This is not devotional prayer or prayers of adoration, though it might include these kinds of prayers. I intend in this introduction to lay out one broad philosophical problem with this

¹ From here on out I will use the term Christian to refer to the generally accepted canon of orthodox beliefs, as espoused, for example, by the Catholic Church. The Apostles' Creed is another accepted document.

practice and define more particularly *why* this problem presents itself in the practice of petitionary prayer.

I am not seeking, in this paper, to answer every philosophical problem allayed against petitionary prayer. Rather, I will address some problems. Hopefully this treatment will answer these questions and thus give way to answering other questions.

What is the “Philosophical” Problem?

To clarify what I mean by a philosophical problem, I want to first provide an analogy. Consider the practice of voting. There are *practical* problems surrounding this practice. For example, what tactic works best to win a majority? Or, how many ads should one buy in a particular township? In the case of petitionary prayer, these kinds of problems also manifest. How long should the deacon pray at the front during worship? What kinds of prayers do we need to pray for the healing of a sick child? How should one talk to God? Certainly each problem has some kind of connection to a philosophical problem (in the grand scheme). Yet, I think that in both of these cases the primary issue at hand is not philosophical, but practical.

On the other hand, there are problems regarding both of these practices that are *philosophical*. In the case of voting, there is the question of whether one should vote when one knows that their vote has no real significance to the overall voting. Another concern one what might have is whether or not it is right to vote without having full knowledge of the candidates’ credentials. In both of these cases, the problem is not immediately practical. One can still practically step up to

a voting stand and cast a vote without answering these questions. Is this right though? Can one simply dismiss these pressing thoughts at the voting stand? For the thoughtful voter, then, these kinds of philosophical problems present themselves in addition to the more practical problems.

In the practice of petitionary prayer, philosophical problems also are manifest and, I think, can be much more pronounced and stifling. Why pray if God has already ordained the future? Does praying even make sense to an almighty transcendent God? And, why should one pray to a God who is invisible, silent, and unknown? These problems vex many who seek God much more than the philosophical problems might vex voters. And though these problems might not take immediate concern in minds as they are kneeling to pray for a sick child, they remain problems as one seeks to understand with one's mind what God has commanded. The great command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your *mind*" (Luke 10:27 [italics added])² becomes a stumbling block to this practice of prayer. And for one who seeks to fulfill both the command and the practice, these questions can become utterly stifling. Indeed, the philosophical problems really do become *practical* problems.

What then is it about petitionary prayer that makes it so *philosophically* puzzling and practically stifling? And why does the philosophical mind have a

² Unless otherwise noted, all the Scriptural references in this work will be from the *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version*. National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1995. bible.oremus.org.

difficult time wrapping itself around this practice of prayer?³ To answer this question, I will note an important difference between philosophy and prayer. The articulation of this difference will draw sharper lines around the particular issue that arises when one executes a philosophical analysis of prayer.

The Underlying Difference

There is this important difference: prayer is an especially *spiritual* discipline while philosophy is an especially *unspiritual* discipline. I say the word “especially” to denote the fact that both of these disciplines distinctly function in this way. That is, they are understood and practiced according to some particular quality of “spiritualness” or “unspiritualness.”

To convey what I mean by spiritual and unspiritual, I will give some explanation behind these terms. In the case of philosophy, for example, one is called to not assume circumstances that are beyond human reason. On the other hand, in the case of petitionary prayer, one is called to pray *behind* (yes, behind) what one can perceive with the human mind. I should explain what I mean by *behind*. In the Bible, Jesus instructs his followers to pray “with faith” and not to pray according to what they can only see or understand.⁴ God calls his followers to pray actually *past and without even looking to* what they can see or

³ It will be important in our discussion to distinguish between those problems that arise concerning the *general* practice of prayer and those concerned with petitionary prayer in particular. As it is, most of the problems that arise in regard to petitionary prayer will also arise in regard to prayer in general. However, for the sake of brevity, I will only address those problems as they arise in regard to petitionary prayer in particular, though they might also apply to other spiritual topics.

⁴ See the feeding of the 5,000 for an example of this (Matt. 14:15-21).

understand.⁵ So, by spiritual, I mean those things that are believed in but not necessarily part of our physical experience. By unspiritual, I mean those things that simply, in our understanding, are “facts” of the universe, they are things we experience on a simply earthly level.

I think a point made by C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* will convey this distinction between the what is unspiritual in philosophy and spiritual in petitionary prayer. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis makes the point that there is a big difference between “the way things are” and “the way things should be” in regard to natural laws, like the laws of nature, like gravity, and the law of, what he calls “human nature.”⁶ Lewis states:

When you say that nature is governed by certain laws, this may only mean that nature does, in fact behave in a certain way. The so-called laws may not be anything real—anything above and beyond the actual facts which we observe... The Law of Nature, or of Right and Wrong, must be something above and beyond the actual facts of human behaviour. In this case, besides the actual facts, you have something else—a real law which we did not invent and which we know we ought to obey.⁷

Here, Lewis draws a distinction here between “facts” and “reality.” He says that the Law of Nature is based on some reality that is “beyond” what we experience in this world. It is based on what he calls “a real law.” In another place, he explains, “there is more than one kind of reality.”⁸ I think this is my point: there is world in which things “seem to be” and another world in which things “truly are.”

⁵ I know that some readers are objecting to this, but this is as I have found it in the Bible. I received this revelation from him through wisdom. But, it is also evidenced in the Scriptures. Consider Proverbs 3:5-7 and 1 Corinthians 2:14; the latter I will mention again in another footnote on this.

⁶ Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 3.

⁷ Ibid. 17.

⁸ Ibid. 16.

There is this kind of world of experience on the earthly level, and there is another world, the spiritual world in which things *truly* are. This is the difference I between what is spiritual and what is unspiritual.

This point is made by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. Here, he also draws this distinction between what is “spiritual” and what is “unspiritual.” He states, “And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor. 2:13). “Unspiritual” people, he explains, cannot understand these things for they are unspiritual (2:14). Thus, it is clear from Scripture that there is this distinction between what is spiritual and unspiritual and that one is discerned by the Spirit and one is not. Prayer concerns itself with those things that are spiritual and philosophy concerns itself with those things that unspiritual.

I hope this does not deter anyone from continuing with this paper, by my claim that philosophy deals with things that are not the true reality. This is simply the reality that we are presented as we approach this issue, and I must state it before heading into this discussion.

This distinction should clarify *why* there exist so many philosophical problems in regard to petitionary prayer. As I hope my description shows, there is a problem in *schemas* coming to surface here. According to Jean Piaget, schemas are those understandings and mental complexes we apply to things that we set our mind to. While prayer deals with spiritual matters and those things that cannot be comprehended by the natural mind, philosophy deals with just that—things comprehended by the natural mind, what is unspiritual. So, there exists a gap here

that anyone who wants to address these questions, the gap between the *philosophical* schema, a mindset defined by those things that are unspiritual and the *schema* a person who practices petitionary prayer operates in, a mindset determined by those things that are spiritual.

I think this point sharpens the issues regarding petitionary prayer into its proper focus. In regard to issues such as free will, providence, foreknowledge and the perplexing admonition of our Christ, “Ask and it shall be given you” (Matt. 6:9-13), one must remember that *prayer is primarily spiritual and philosophy is primarily unspiritual*. Because of this no one will ever be able to give a complete philosophical analysis of prayer and should not try to. Prayer is a spiritual discipline and as such is relegated to a spiritual understanding. Philosophy can go so far but no further. Indeed, it can go some way, as Paul admits when he condescends to “speak in the flesh” to his people in the church. There are indeed times when we must speak in the flesh in order to convey God’s truth. I think such a time is this as I speak on this issue of prayer in a primarily unspiritual language. Though, God’s Spirit certainly works through all things, even in this kind of approach.

So, to begin this analysis of petitionary prayer, I have already laid the ground for understanding why so many problems arise when addressing this issue of prayer from a philosophical perspective. Now, I will move on to address prayer and some particular philosophical issues allayed against. I will first explain prayer broadly, then I will go into three specific problems which I will delineate in the coming chapters.

PART I
An Overview

CHAPTER TWO

An Analysis of the Christian Practice of Petitionary Prayer

In this chapter I discuss the place of prayer in the Christian life and give a clearer description of petitionary prayer in general. This will set us to understand exactly what we are addressing here as we approach these philosophical problems arising from it.

A Definition

Prayer, in general, is simply “the lifting of one’s mind to God.”⁹ Thus, petitionary prayer is a practice that lifts one’s mind to God by making requests of him. It is a series of petitions to God specifically. Petitionary prayer is one kind of many types of prayers recognized by the Christian church. Others include prayers of blessing, adoration, praise, intercession, and thanksgiving.¹⁰

The church understands petitionary prayer to be a kind of *spiritual discipline*. Spiritual disciplines are those practices and activities that Christians, particularly (as other religions do have their own forms of these disciplines) partake in as part of their relationship with God. Dependent upon what particular discipline it is, it will have different purposes. In general, though, these disciplines are practiced in order to conform to God’s purposes and to grow closer to God.

⁹ *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

¹⁰ From Section 4: Prayer; Article 3: In the Age of the Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* < <http://old.usccb.org/catechism/text/pt4sect1chpt1art3.shtml>>.

The Role of Petitionary Prayer in the Life of a Christian

There are three things that stand out in my mind as important roles of petitionary prayer in the body of Christ.

Intimacy with God. This is perhaps the most widely accepted understanding of the role of prayer, in general, and of petitionary prayer in particular. One makes petitions of God and asks him for things not because one needs to inform God of one's needs or to get him to do something, but to develop a relationship with him. It's also important to note that this explanation plays a key role in dispelling some philosophical attacks against petitionary prayer.

Developing Christ-like character. There is a general understanding among the church that those who commit themselves to prayer generally have more upstanding moral character and loving personalities. I know from my own experience, this is so. Many times I have gone into times of prayer feeling weighed down by particular anxieties or overwhelming emotions or even with a bad attitude. However, after praying, I have come out feeling utterly joyful and loving! Further than this immediate change, I have observed in the lives of Christians who practice this discipline a *deep* change in their own personal characters. Things that used to anger them or situations that would demonstrate their character flaws no longer do and they walk with more humility and grace in their lives.

Receiving things from God. One cannot do away with also the prescribed purpose of petitionary prayer. Although most certainly believe that it heightens

intimacy and strengthens moral character, most also believe that it is a means to, plainly, asking and receiving from God.

Prayer, broadly speaking, engages us in the first two ways I mentioned. However, one needs petitionary prayer, specifically to fully experience God in these ways. For example, in the case of intimacy with God, one might be able to grow closer to God by adoring him and praising his name. However, one cannot grow completely and *fully* intimate with God without also experiencing him on this very practical level of “asking and receiving.” It is particularly in this place that Christians grow in their faith and trust in God. This is hard to achieve outside the context of a practice of petitionary prayer. In the same way, one cannot fully develop a Christ-like character without this medium specifically. Through this, one grows in discerning what one should and should not ask for, thus growing in understanding the will of God. In addition, once one asks for something, one acts *in accordance with* their requests. That is, one cannot sensibly ask God to give oneself more humility and then make no efforts at developing this humility¹¹. This would be hypocritical and unfaithful. Through petitioning, though, one becomes aware of the goodness of God and begins to walk in accordance with it.

In addition to these general understandings of the role of petitionary prayer in the Christian life, there are some distinct *teachings* on it that are also important in the church. For now, I will look at the teachings of Christ. And to end, I will look at a quote from Augustine.

¹¹ This idea is reflected in the Christian idea of “stewarding.” It is not that we do anything on our own, but we must be responsible for what God has given us and for what we ask of him. See Matt. 25:14-30

I would like to look at four particular things Christ teaches us in regard to this discipline: One, the importance of coming like a child in prayer. Two, the importance of persevering in prayer. Three, the personal nature of prayer. And four, what it means when one does not receive what one has asked for.

Childlike Faith

In the “Sermon on the Mount,”¹² Christ uses the analogy of a father and son to teach about petitionary prayer in this passage:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:7-11).

This passage reveals an enormous amount on this practice. I would like to divide this passage up into three parts, dealing with each part in turn. First, I will look at what Christ means in the first verse, beginning with this phrase, “Ask, and it will be given to you...”

In the Christian community, this teaching comes to manifest itself in a variety of ways. First, there are those who use this teaching to support their requests for wealth and prosperity and fame in the world. “If one only asks and believes,” they might quote. On the other hand, there are many who I do not think understand the simplicity of this teaching from Christ. That is, they overcomplicate the requirements for this kind of relationship with God. The

¹² This teaching is also paralleled in all the other gospels, often on more than one occasion. See John 14, Luke 11, etc.

plainness of Christ's teaching shocks them. Is it at all comprehensible to believe that one can simply ask and receive?

I think this is the reason why Jesus quickly follows up this statement by comparing one's relationship with God to the relationship between a father and son. "Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?" It is the case in one's relationship with God that we can come to him as a child to a father. We do not need to treat him as someone wholly distant and other but we can come to him as little children, asking for those things that we need.

And, as the last part of this passage indicates, we can also come to God with our wants and desires. "If you then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt.7:11). Christ is teaching us here about what it means to be in relationship with a good father, our heavenly Father. Our heavenly father is not one that only gives us what we need, he is a father who loves to bestow the things we desire and want upon us.

It seems, then, that we overcomplicate things when we try to rationalize how to come to the Father in the act of prayer. For our Lord says, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Perseverance and Hope in Prayer

It might be incumbent at this point to voice the concern of many who are reading this right now. While this teaching is marvelously simple, it seems that there are many places in Scripture and in our own life experience where people *don't* seem to be getting what they want. People are in bondage to oppressive governmental systems, wives lose their husbands, children are without food. What about these cases? How does this fit with the above passage. I think that Christ's teaching on the persistent widow will shed some light on this. Jesus said:

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming (Luke 18:2-5).

This mirrors many of our experiences in everyday life when we are persevering with God and seemingly getting nowhere with our prayers and our acts of obedience toward him. Christ teaches in this passage that there will be times when we will have to persevere and continue to pray and plead for things, even things as elemental as justice. However, Christ also points out that God will always come through. God will never leave someone who continues to persist in prayer. Indeed, Christ goes on:

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Matt 18:6-8).

The Lord teaches us in this teaching that we must always persist in prayer and never give up on God and believing that he will come through for us. We must be found faithful (vs. 8), Christ teaches.

Personal Prayer

In one of Christ's teachings about prayer, he tells people, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret..." (Matt. 6:6). There is a great sense of "personalness" demonstrated in Christ's teachings about prayer. In response to the ornate and grandiose worship and almsgiving demonstrated by the Pharisees and religious elite, Jesus responds with teachings that push one to simplicity and, again, childlikeness.

One significant area this touches on is the grand challenge to his disciples: "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Jesus here is telling them that they can ask, from their own free will for *anything*. It is not just that they can only ask for things they are supposed to ask for. They can ask for *anything*, he says. Certainly there is much to say about having the right character in making these requests. But, the import of this is just as powerful. God has given us the freedom to come to him with any request and know that we will receive our request. He is a personal God and wants a personal relationship where one comes to the other in freedom.

Asking and Not Receiving

And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

How can we understand this passage from the teachings already listed here? It is not that Jesus is not persevering in prayer, for he has waited his entire life for this moment. It is not that he is not coming like a child, for we know that as the Christ he must have truly become like a child to God. Why then, is our Lord and Savior not receiving what he asks at the merciful and loving hands of our Father in heaven?

I, for myself, cannot fully answer this question. However, I can pull out something important that I feel that this passage clearly portrays, and that is having faith in God that goes beyond yourself. I think it was the case here that Christ had a real desire to understand what the Father was doing and did not totally comprehend *why* he was doing these things. But, as God tells him to do, Christ obeys and ultimately even submits his will to God's will. I am not sure whether his desires came into God's desires. But, his will did.

From this, then, I think the important point is that we must always pray in accordance with God's divine will. Indeed, Christ has the perfect prayer here when he says, "Not what I will, but what you will." This is also evidenced in his model prayer, the Lord's prayer: "Thy will be done" is the second (or third, considering some interpretations) request he makes of God. In true prayer, one must pray in accordance with God's divine will.

Prayer and the Ultimate End

Beyond all this, I would like to bring out this important point from Augustine in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount:

But again one might ask whether we are to pray by words or deeds and what need there is for prayer, if God already knows what is needful for us. But it is because the act of prayer clarifies and purges our heart and makes it more capable of receiving the divine gifts that are poured out for us in the spirit. God does not give heed to the ambitiousness of our prayers, because he is always ready to give to us his light, not a visible light but an intellectual and spiritual one: but we are not always ready to receive it when we turn aside and down to other things out of a desire for temporal things. For in prayer there occurs a turning of the heart to he who is always ready to give if we will but take what he gives: and in that turning is the purification of the inner eye when the things we crave in the temporal world are shut out; so that the vision of the pure heart can bear the pure light that shines divinely without setting or wavering: and not only bear it, but abide in it; not only without difficulty, but even with unspeakable joy, with which the blessed life is truly and genuinely brought to fulfillment.¹³

Prayer begins from the very start of one's journey with God. Indeed, one cannot be in relationship with God or "born again"¹⁴ until one has "prayed a prayer," asking God to forgive one's sins and to enter into relationship with him. The Bible teaches us that we must ask God to do these things for us as we lay down our lives for him.¹⁵ This is significant in the point of petitionary prayer. From the very start of one's relationship with God, one is engaging critically with this practice. However, this practice does not end here.

The church understands prayer to be that practice that, on a practical level, provides for our daily needs. It *sustains* our relationship with God, others and the

¹³ Augustine. "On the Sermon on the Mount." Trans. William Findlay. Volume 6 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. ed. Philip Schaff. Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Co., 1888. New Advent. ed. Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1601.htm> (accessed 1 April 2012).

¹⁴ John 3:3 and also see footnote 6 from this chapter.

¹⁵ This I draw from just a general understanding from my relationship with God and what I have learned through the church; for a clearer description of this please look to one of the following: Whitley, William T. *Doctrine of Grace*, (New York: Macmillan, 1932); "Sanctifying Grace" and "Salvation" from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* <[newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org)>.

world. That is, through this medium of prayer, we are able to ask God for those things that can bring us closer to him and help us love and cherish others more. And, again, it is a medium for us to engage God on the most basic levels of our humanity. Through this practice, we ask God for our daily bread and petition him to grant us our most innate desires. It is a practice that truly gives us everything we need.

However, it is even more acknowledged among the church that this practice of petitionary prayer is *not* simply a means to acquiring these ends. *Rather, it is a practice that leads us to our true end, God himself.* Through this medium of petitionary prayer, we must come to God our Father with all our needs, only to find that he is our one true need. As the Scripture says, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”¹⁶ While it is true that we need God to provide our daily needs, Scripture shows and the church teaches that what we really need is God himself.

¹⁶ Said by Jesus in Matt. 4:4 (Luke 4:4 parallel) and also originally stated by God himself, Deut. 8:3.

CHAPTER THREE

Some Questions Regarding Petitionary Prayer

I think it is good in this section to catalogue some of the questions that arise in relation to petitionary prayer. Firstly, I will go through some of the more general questions, questions that might be asked by anyone vexed by the issue—those things that really bother the mind. And then, I will go through those questions that are more philosophically based. From here, also, I will go into some key concepts regarding these issues, issues such as divine providence and free will that are essential in addressing this topic. These questions addressed here are perhaps, for many, only explored for the sake of curiosity. However, these questions can also become larger more “practically vexing” problems in the face of petitionary prayer. So, let us begin with the more practically vexing problems.

Basic Human Questions

When I approach this question, I immediately think of those people that are troubled in their minds by these kinds of thoughts, “Why must I ask God for things if he loves me?” “Why must I ask in the right way and at the right time for him to give me things?” These are difficult questions. Why would someone who is all-powerful and all-good require that you ask him before you receive something you want or even need? Other questions include, “Why ask for things if God has already ordained the future?” Does it make sense for humans to ask for things if everything is already ordained? Or, finally, some very desperate

questions and yearnings of the heart come from a place like this: “When I pray, I don’t feel, see, or experience God on any level. Why should I pray?” It is questions like these that cause problems for many people in the area of petitionary prayer.

Philosophical Concepts

In this section, I will look at the philosophical issues and concepts associated with these questions, and articulate more cleanly what these problems actually are in the philosophical world. I will also spend some time defining some key theological concepts to this discussion through here. This will set us up to address each of these problems in the following chapters.

First, at issue above all else is philosophical problem that philosophers call “the problem of evil.” Essentially, this problem is this: If God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there evil? He should be able to prevent it if he is all-powerful and want to if he is all-good. Thus, many conclude, either God is not both all-powerful and all-good (he is either one or the other) or he does not exist. This is the problem behind most of these questions. “Why must I ask God for things if he loves me?” and “Why should I pray if I don’t feel God?” are, in one way, saying, there is something wrong and this should not be—there is some evil. Then, they take the next step to question God himself, his goodness and his character.

So, this is firstly at issue, philosophically speaking: the problem of evil. Beyond this, though, there are also these: divine providence, free will, and God’s hiddenness. I want to look at all these briefly in this chapter to prepare us as we

address each of the philosophical problems associated with the questions I have put forward that arise in regard to petitionary prayer.

Free Will

By free will, I mean that phenomenon that people describe as including both *alternative possibilities* and *personal agency*. To describe these things I will use an example. There is a man named Bob and Bob wants to buy an ice cream for his son. Now, according to the principle of alternative possibilities, Bob has the potential to not buy an ice cream for his son. That is, *it is possible for him to make this decision*, or another decision for that matter (buy an ice cream for his neighbor, for example). For one who does not accept the doctrine of alternative possibilities, they might say that it is not possible that he make any other decision. He must make this decision to buy this ice cream. As for the notion of personal agency, we would say that Bob not only has the possibility of making another decision, he has *control* over this decision. That is, it is not something external to him that makes this decision. Certainly other factors influence his reasons for making this decision; however, ultimately the decision is based purely from his own agency.

Divine Providence

This issue of free will is brought up in relation to those questions regarding “Why pray if God already has ordained what will happen?” What this question is really getting at is this issue of free will and a concept known as “divine providence.” Divine providence is essentially the notion that God has

already ordained and set everything that will happen. He “providentially” guides all creation and every event that occurs toward his divine will. In the Psalms, it states,

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it (Psalm 65:9).

This verse shows that God reveals his providential care through his provision for creation. And in addition, his providence includes his wrath and judgement. He prophesies this through Jeremiah when speaking judgement over the people of Israel:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel (Jer. 18:6).

So, through his divine providence, God forms and guides all creation into his divine will, whether that be to provide and nurture or to destroy and judge.

In the next chapter, we will look at the problem that erupts from the combination of these two in the practice of petitionary prayer. The problem represented in the initial question of “How does this make sense” is considered a “consistency” problem in the realm of philosophy—between petitionary prayer, divine providence and free will. For now, though, I will move on to go over some more key terms and concepts.

Goodness and Divine Hiddenness

The next set of questions I want to address are the first questions I presented, which question the very *goodness* of this system of petitionary prayer.

The questions, “Why ask if God loves me?” and “Why do I need to ask for certain things at certain times and in certain ways?” are questioning this system. The issue behind this is the idea that God is not good because he doesn’t simply provide for his creation, he makes them ask. Why has he established this system? Does this make sense with a good God? These are the kinds of questions this problem addresses. The key concepts related to this inquiry are primarily theological. I will introduce these concepts in the chapter itself, for now I just want to distinguish this problem as a problem concerning the very *system* of asking and receiving. There is a problem, many think, with this system itself.

The last philosophical subject I want to introduce is the subject of what philosophers call God’s “divine hiddenness.” By this, they are referring to those experiences we have of God being “far away” or “distant,” that he doesn’t hear our prayers or respond to us in any way. People don’t sense his presence or hear his voice (at least, they argue this is often the case). One prominent author in this field also argues that this lack of sensing God’s presence is reason for not believing in God. He claims that if one has the capacity for “reasonable nonbelief,” then God is not God, in which case, the God that we know of as all-good and all-powerful is not real.¹⁷ Naturally, this subject is dealt with as a significant problem under the larger “problem of evil.” Indeed, it is a problem that God at least appears so hidden from us. Why, if God is good and loving does he remain so distant from us and not reveal himself to us?

¹⁷ See J.L. Shellenberg’s book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

The topics I have just discussed all have a relevant place in the questions I introduced at the beginning of this chapter and these are all related to the problems I will address in the coming chapters. Firstly, the topics of free will and divine providence arise in relation to the question I posed, “Why pray if God has already ordained the future?” This question hinges on the problem that arises when one says that God has ordained and planned all that happens and yet also that man has a free will and makes his own choices. In regard to petitionary prayer, a problem arises significantly because petitionary prayer is largely built around both of these concepts, free will and divine providence. How can both of these coexist in this practice? I will address this problem particularly in the next chapter. Later, I will address a problem concerning the very goodness of God’s system of asking and receiving. This goes back to the question, “Why should I ask for things if God already loves me?” This is questioning God’s system that he has set in place. To address this question I will use some theological notions I will introduce in the chapter itself. There is a deep connection between our relationship with God and God’s establishment of this system of asking and receiving. Finally, I will address the problem of God’s hiddenness, a problem I articulated some above. To answer this question, I will also utilize some notions introduced by some theological concepts in later chapters.

PART II
The Problems

CHAPTER FOUR

Molinism, Free Will, and Divine Providence

In the previous chapter, we discussed some component philosophical and theological concepts related to these problems arising in petitionary prayer. In this chapter, I will look at one particular problem introduced in the previous chapter, the problem of divine providence and free will. To answer this problem, I will introduce the Molinist theory and apply its essential tenets to the problem concerning petitionary prayer specifically. First, I will give a short explanation of Molinism, as described primarily by Thomas Flint in his book *Divine Providence*. I will then move on to address the allegations made against petitionary prayer with the concepts and tenets provided in Molinism.

Two Tenets of Molinism

In his introductory paragraph, Thomas Flint explains the essential objectives of Molinism, to tie together “the strong notion of divine providence typically affirmed by Christians through the centuries” and “the libertarian picture of freedom”¹⁸ Molinists are committed to believing both of these things. As explained in the previous chapter, divine providence is the concept that God is in complete control of his creation and lovingly directs and performs his will throughout all his creation and throughout all of time. Now, libertarian freedom is

¹⁸ Flint, Thomas, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11.

a slight deviation from the original concept introduced (free will). Libertarian freedom carries the same qualities I described for freedom (alternative possibilities and personal agency) in the previous chapter. They distinguish it as “libertarian” to denote it from other views that allow external things to determine (at least partly) human action. For example, in the concept of “compatibilist freedom,” freedom exists within a system of determinism, a system in which outside circumstances determine one’s decisions. In libertarian freedom, all decisions are made purely out of one’s own agency, which is not at odds with the definition we already presented.¹⁹

In this next part I will explain the general problem that is presented to Molinism concerning these two issues: This is the problem I discussed briefly in the previous chapter in regard to petitionary prayer. It concerns itself with questions such as, “Why pray if God has already ordained the future?” or “What does it mean *choose* to pray if God is always leading us?” These and other questions, though, come out of this more general problem that arises in the composite of free will and divine providence.

Free Will/Providence Problem

There are many ways that people have described this problem that arises. Basically, the problem comes down to what many see as an *inconsistency* between the reality of divine providence and free will. Consider the following scenarios: Bob decides to take a picture of a friend walking on the street. Bob

¹⁹ Flint gives some explanation of this on these pages, *Divine Providence*, 22-23.

decides to go to church. Bob decides that he should stop helping his friend because it is taking too much of his time.

Now, the doctrine of divine providence states that God has divinely ordained everything that occurs and has set everything in his divine plan for eternity. Additionally, he is in control of every situation and nothing happens without his divine hand leading and guiding it. In which of these situations, then, is Bob acting freely? It appears, from the doctrine of divine providence, that Bob makes none of these decisions, for God has already ordained what will happen. On the other hand, some of these decisions do not seem like decisions God would cause Bob to make. God does not want people to be selfish and stop helping people. Also, why would God ordain the event of Bob taking a picture of a friend. This simply seems pointless. The only scenario that seems “God-ordained” (to many, at least) is causing Bob to go to church. So, is it the case that Bob made some of these decisions of his own accord and some were made by God? But even if this is the case, it does not appear God can truly be in complete control. For, if Bob made some of these decisions apart from God, God did not have control of these situations.

The problem that arises here is a problem of understanding how free will and divine providence co-exist and work together in reality. How can God divinely ordain everything and yet humans still have free will? Beyond this bare inconsistency, it appears to raise other problems as well. Does God *cause* us to make evil decisions? Are we really free or is this just a mirage? If that is true, how is God loving by deceiving us to think we have free will? These and other

questions arise from this problem of free will and divine providence.

The Molinist makes it his main prerogative to reconcile both of these things. Before I go into how he solves it, though, I will first present the problem of free will and divine providence as it manifests itself in those questions we addressed in petitionary prayer.

The Petitionary Prayer Problem

In the chapter on the practice of petitionary prayer, I noted two particular teachings of Christ that are relevant to this treatment of the problem. First, I stated that Christ teaches us that petitionary prayer is “personal,” it involves our own free will and we make our own decisions about what to ask for from God. In addition, I ended the section by describing the scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsamane, when he uttered, “Not what I will, but what you will” to God at his death (Mark 14:36).²⁰ Here I showed that the ultimate path in prayer is to ask for those things that are God’s will and not your own. Thus, the problem in petitionary prayer arises here in regard to this issue of free will and divine providence.

1. When we petition God, we do so in accordance with his divine will.
2. Petitions are an act of our own free will.

As I explained above, it appears that one cannot be making a free decision when it is already ordained by God. In the case of prayer, then, a particularly clear example of God’s leading and guidance, how can one say that a petition is a free

²⁰ See pages 14-15 in chapter 2 for this.

action? If all prayer is led by God and its outcomes are already ordained by God, how can any petition we make be of our own free will? Or, if it is of our own free will, how does this necessarily fit into God's divine will.

Thus, many conclude that these two propositions are inconsistent, they deny the possibility of the other. From this, then, one may deny one of the premises. If they deny the first, they are dismissing the idea of divine providence, of God's sovereign leadership and control of all creation. On the other hand, if one denies the second premise, one is dismissing the idea of free will. In this case, all petitions are purely deterministic and there is no sense of freedom in one's relation to God in petitionary prayer.

From here, I think the next step is to claim that petitionary prayer, itself, is a logically inconsistent practice. For, if rests on both of these propositions, and these propositions are inconsistent with one another, the practice itself is as well. It appears to me that this is one major reason why people stop engaging in petitionary prayer. When they cannot sort out these philosophical problems in their head, they cannot truly engage in the practice on a spiritual level. That is more of a side note, but I thought it was worth mentioning. To conclude I will give my construction of a Molinist response to this particular problem concerning petitionary prayer.

Molinism and Petitionary Prayer

As I explained before, the Molinists affirm both the doctrine of divine providence and the doctrine of libertarian free will. This idea of divine providence is the idea that God is in sovereign control and that he knows the present and the

future. The idea of libertarian free will is the notion that humans have both control of their actions and the possibility of doing another action (“alternative possibilities”). They solve this seeming incompatibility through a notion Thomas Molina himself invented, termed “middle knowledge.”

Middle knowledge is the idea of a particular kind of knowledge that God has that is neither what is termed as “free” or “natural.” God’s free knowledge refers to the knowledge of what he will or will not freely do. For example, an example of God’s free knowledge is his knowledge that in twenty years he will cause an earthquake in the African continent because of its people’s sin. Natural knowledge refers to his knowledge of necessary truths, those things that must be such as God’s character and, Molina believes, things such as logic and math.

Middle knowledge refers to God’s knowledge of contingent truths that are not up to him. While God’s free knowledge is of contingent truths as well (what he will choose to do), these truths are up to him. In the case of middle knowledge, these truths are “independent of God’s free will.”²¹ Thomas Flint explains that this middle knowledge is based in God’s knowledge of what he terms *counterfactuals of creaturely freedom*. Counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are those facts that would obtain given a particular scenario. If free creature A were to be in circumstance C, he would choose option O. Although this does not necessarily occur, it is nonetheless true that it would occur. And, it is not inconsistent with free will, according to Molina, for God to know this concerning his free creatures.

²¹ Flint, Thomas. *Divine Providence*, 41.

It is through this notion of middle knowledge that Molinists solve this problem of free will and divine providence. God does not *know* our future free actions. Rather, he simply knows what we *would* do in particular circumstances. He knows through his knowledge of certain counterfactuals. In the Bob example, then, God knows that Bob will make these decisions not because he *caused* him to make these decisions, but because he knows what Bob would do in each of these circumstances. And, through his providential hand, he guides all creation into these particular scenarios.²²

In regard to petitionary prayer, specifically, then, the Molinists solve the problem thus: God does divinely guide our practice of petitionary prayer through his providential hand, but he does not force us in any of this. Rather, through his use of middle knowledge, he is able to bring about our praying and our receiving the requests of our prayers. He divinely ordains both of these things.

Thus, the conclusion is that one has free will when making petitions and is acting in accord with divine providence (1 and 2 of the problem). There is no problem and petitionary prayer is not inconsistent. The solution only fails if the Molinist theory fails. And that is a discussion for another place.

²² Or, he makes his decisions about how to guide all creation into these scenarios from his knowledge of other counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. That is, many do not think God ordains scenarios that he knows will incite his creatures to sin. But, given the free decisions of others, he works with their decisions to bring about his plan.

CHAPTER FIVE

Asking and Receiving and God's Goodness

In this chapter, I will look at the problem of, what I am calling, God's goodness. Essentially, this problem addresses the issue of whether or not God is good on account of instituting this system of asking and receiving. To explore this problem, I want to look at Eleonore Stump's article on petitionary prayer. From here, I want to address this problem of God's goodness with some things that God has shown me. I hope to show that this problem is not such a big problem.

Eloenore Stump writes this in her essay titled "Petitionary Prayer": "Is a belief in the efficacy and usefulness of petitionary prayer consistent with a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God?"²³ She constructs her argument in thirteen parts. It begins like this:

1. A perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be if he can avoid doing so.
2. An omniscient and omnipotent being can avoid doing anything which it is not logically necessary for him to do.
3. An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being never makes the world worse than it would otherwise be unless it is logically necessary for him to do so.

The argument continues to these premises concerning petitionary prayer:

10. If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world worse than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will not fulfill that request.

²³ Stump, Elenore, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 1979): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/20009745> (accessed 15 April 2012).

11. If what is requested in a petitionary prayer is or results in a state of affairs the realization of which would make the world better than it would otherwise be, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being will bring about that state of affairs even if no prayer for its realization has been made.

And finally, she ends with these conclusions:

12. Petitionary prayer effects no change.
13. Petitionary prayer is pointless.²⁴

This is the argument that Stump constructs against petitionary prayer.²⁵ It begins with the notion of God's goodness, and works with the notion of God's providence to produce an argument that seemingly destroys the validity of petitionary prayer.

The issue at hand for Stump, then, is to show that petitionary prayer is not pointless and that it is a good system created by a good God.²⁶ Later, in the essay, she writes, "Why should prayers be included in God's plan as causes of certain effects? And what sense is there in the notion that a perfect and unchangeable God, who disposes and plans everything, fulfills men's prayers asking him to do one thing or another?"²⁷ The question she is asking is "Why is this a good system? This system of asking and receiving? How is this good? And how can God be good for establishing and utilizing this system?"

²⁴ Argument constructed from sections from Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 83-85.

²⁵ Though the argument is missing some extraneous premises which states things such as "An omniscient and omnipotent being can do anything which it is not logically impossible for him to do" (83). I think we get the gist of the argument from what I gave above.

²⁶ This jump from, "Is petitionary prayer pointless?" to "Ok, it's not pointless, but is it a good system?" is one Eleonore makes. She admits that this is how God works. So, she affirms that it is not pointless. But, it seems her question then becomes, "Is it good?" Thus, she reverts back to her original question. It seems that the argument she constructs simply sets up the reasoning behind why one would come to doubt the goodness of prayer, insofar as it is inconsistent. (?)

²⁷ Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," 86.

The Imagination of God

To address this problem, I do not want to address it as squarely as she presented it. To address it, I want to rather present a beautiful aspect of this system of asking and receiving that I think will show any person not only the adequacy of this system of asking and receiving, but its very brilliance and utter creativity. This aspect that I want to focus on is the role of imagination in petitionary prayer.

C.S. Lewis states, “Reason is the natural order of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning.” Here I want to show how this imagination vitalizes and feeds the life of prayer, and especially the life of petitionary prayer. To begin, I will explain two essential concepts to the understanding of imagination in Christianity. The first concept I will discuss is what Christianity refers to as “the Word of God,” and the second is the concept of the indwelling of Christ in man.

The Word of God, in the Bible, takes on numerous meanings. In the beginning, the Word was the means through which God created the earth. “God spoke” and it was. God created by his very “Word.” Later, in the New Testament, John the apostle conveys the revelation of Jesus Christ the Son of God as the Word. The church, in particular, has come to take on this meaning of the Word. Theologians and believers through the centuries have also tied these two notions together to understand what John reveals in his opening lines:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being (John 1:1-3).

Jesus, the Word of God, is also the means by which God created the world in the beginning. He is both the Son of God, holy and united with God in perfect deity, and he is the foundation of all creation. In the Proverbs, also, Jesus Christ is represented in a similar light, as the “Wisdom” of God. Solomon explains:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
By understanding he established the heavens;
By his knowledge the deeps broke open,
And the clouds drop down the dew (Prov. 3:19-20).²⁸

Here Solomon is speaking of the same Word, only in light of him as the “Wisdom” of God. However, he is still attributed with the act of creation.

In the New Testament, God reveals the Son as that Word that comes to live inside believers when they believe in him. In the Parable of the Sower, the life of Christ is identified as “the word” that is planted inside of believers and that which springs up inside them to Christ’s life. When one comes to believe in the Word of God, Jesus Christ, he comes to live inside and work his transformation. Paul explains that when Christ comes to live within us, his very nature transforms our inner nature. The power of his Word reshapes who we are and makes us more and more into the image of God.²⁹

This is important for our discussion of imagination because, through practice and meditation, Christians have come to know that Christ, this Word of God is a kind of “imagination” of God. This Word is the source of all creation and the inspiring “word” behind everything that happens of God. It is through the

²⁸ *The Holy Bible: The English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Illinois: Good News Publishers, 2003).

²⁹ See Romans 7-8.

Word that God brings forth his plans. In the Old Testament, God used his prophets to bring forth his judgement and blessing on nations when he would have them prophesy his Word over the land. In the New Testament, this same Word is revealed as the ultimate centerpiece of creation, and that through which all the world is brought back to the state of creation. Jesus Christ is the “cornerstone” of God’s people, the church—that body that will bear forth God’s kingdom on the earth. He is truly behind every work of God, the imaginative work of God.

The fact that we have “the mind of Christ” is what ties this notion of the Word of God to the practice of petitionary prayer.³⁰ In the practice of petitionary prayer, one *engages* the imagination of God and so is able to bring forth his purposes in the earth.

First, if one has the mind of Christ, one knows the will of God. I spoke of this earlier in chapter two. Paul enjoins believers to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”³¹ Once a believer accepts the Word of God in them, Jesus Christ, they are transformed or begin a process of transformation. One significant part of this transformation is gaining the mind of Christ. Through this, one is able to then think and act in accordance with the will of God. In addition, as I already showed, one is able to pray according to God’s will.

³⁰ Paul shares this revelation with the Corinthians in his first letter to them. 1 Corinthians 2:16.

³¹ Romans 12:2 ESV

Second, through our engagement with God's imagination in us, we are helping God recreate the world. As I said earlier, Christ, the Word of God, is the centerpiece of all creation. When we engage him through the imagination in prayer, we are able to ask and receive in accordance with his creative work. We are engaging in his work and his will throughout the earth. We ask because Christ within us asks, the "Word of God" within us speaks to the Father and he answers it because it originally proceeded from himself in the first place.

Stump's Problem and God's Imagination

What I hope to have shown above is the beauty of God's system of petitionary prayer and of asking and receiving. The place of asking and receiving through the utilization of God's imagination is a beautiful thing. Consider it from this angle:

A good God decides that he wants to involve his most beloved creation in his process of recreating the world from its mess to its original intent. He does not want to force them to do his will, but he knows that his will is best. So, he causes his Spirit to come and live inside any of those who are willing to accept him. Through this, the believers come to become more like God and begin to be transformed into his image. As a result of this, he is able to grant more and more of their requests because they are asking in accordance with his good will. He is able to grant them the requests of their heart because they are ultimately his requests for them. His original intent was always that they would be of one mind and heart. But, he didn't want to recreate or start over without their acceptance. He wanted it to be a result of their relationship with one another.

I just created this story to give some idea of the reasoning behind God's choice to cause his Spirit to live in us and to cause us to ask according to his will. He wants man to be involved in his new creation. He wants man to ask and to receive from Him because he is in relationship with Him. If God simply did everything without

involving man in the process, he would miss out on the entire point of creation.

The entire point is to be close to God.

In light of this, I think Stump's problem can be brought into proper focus. Stump presents an argument that accuses God of not being good because he plans things and yet requires that man asks for the things that God has already planned. From this explanation, I think it is clear why. God has a beautiful imagination and he wants us to participate in this. Ultimately, it is about being in relationship with Him and his Son, Jesus. It is a beautiful way to commune with him and to come into his grand plan for the recreation of all creation.

I think a personal story might shed some light on the beauty and, simply, the reality of God working in this way. In my experience, I often have dreams and visions of things that are going to be. In this way, God speaks to me about what is on his mind and what he wants to bring about. Recently, my friend Janna went to a concert for the band Gungor, a Christian band who sings a particularly catchy song "Beautiful Things." In this song, they talk about how God recreates everything bad through his Holy Spirit in us, who ourselves are defected. While she was listening to this, she had a vision of me playing this song on the piano, and she was asking herself what this song could mean. When I saw her recently, I suddenly got the urge to grab her and play her the song "Beautiful Things." Now, she did not tell me about this vision or even talk about this song. I simply knew in my spirit what to do. I sat her down and played her this song and then went on to explain to her the significance of the song. She was touched by God and I was able to experience God in this place of his imaginative working. It is a beautiful

thing to be caught up in his imagination and to let him speak through you and use you in this way. Petitionary prayer is one important way he does this through us.

CHAPTER SIX

Problem of Hiddenness

My God, my God, why have you forsaken
me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from
the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not
answer;

and by night, but I find no rest.

- King David (Psalm 22:1-2 NRSV)

The next problem I want to address in this book concerns the larger
“Problem of Hiddenness,” as many have called it, in regard to petitionary prayer.

In this chapter, I want to expand upon the problem I introduced in chapter
three and address it using the writings of John the Apostle, David’s Psalms and
Aquinas. I hope through these two authors that I will be able to address the
allegations made by this problem.

This, then, is the problem of hiddenness as explicated by J.L.

Schellenberg. In his book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, he argues thus:

1. If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur.
3. Reasonable non-belief occurs.
4. No perfectly loving God exists.
5. There is no God.³²

³² Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 83. One might also argue
against premise three, however that is not point he primarily focuses on in his argument and we
will not focus on here.

The crux of his argument lies on premise two³³ “If a perfectly loving God exists, reasonable non-belief does not occur.” If these premises are true, then it seems that one has a reason to doubt God’s existence (given that if there is a God, he is loving). But why think they are true?

The kind of defense Schellenberg gives for premise 2 concerns what he calls “reasonable unbelief.” He argues that given the circumstances, a good God would not make it difficult much less impossible (seemingly), on some counts, to come to believe in him. This, he argues, is true simply because God wants relationship with his creation but also, more importantly, because it is basis of one’s salvation. For, “...whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”³⁴ We can see here that faith is the basis of salvation. So, why or *how* could a good God not allow one to come to see and find him in the earth—to have this kind of faith? This is the problem of hiddenness according to Schellenberg.

The Problem of Hiddenness in Petitionary Prayer

In the case of petitionary prayer, this problem also particularly manifests. It concerns itself with questions such as, “Why do I not see or feel God when I pray?” Or, “Why does he seem so far away.” These are problems that concern the problem of hiddenness. Further, the problem of hiddenness could also concern

³³ Mark L. McCreary points this out in his essay “Schellenberg on divine hiddenness and religious scepticism” *Religious Studies*, vol. 46 (2010): 207-225, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=7606796&jid=RES&volumeId=46&issueId=02&aid=7606788> (accessed 15 March 2012).

³⁴ John 3:16 NRSV

such questions such as “Why does God not answer my prayers?” In this case, one is asking why God’s presence is not more manifest in one’s daily life—in their expectation of receiving from God after asking. All these questions concern this problem.

So, here I will articulate the problem more precisely. It is this, adapted from Schellenberg’s argument:

1. If there is a God, he is perfectly loving.
2. If a perfectly loving God exists, he will interact with his creation through the means of petitionary prayer.
3. God does not interact with his creation through the means of petitionary prayer.
4. God is not perfectly loving.
5. God does not exist.

This, I think, is essentially the problem of hiddenness as it concerns petitionary prayer. The allegation made against petitionary prayer is that it does not involve interaction with God, which seems to be intrinsic to it. Thus, either God does not exist or petitionary prayer is a fraud.³⁵

For sake of this paper, then, I want to take up the second conclusion, “petitionary prayer is a fraud.” For, the problem we are addressing here is not whether or not God exists but whether or not petitionary prayer is a legitimate Christian practice. Perhaps one can argue from the phenomenon of petitionary prayer that God does not exist, but that is not what we are doing here. Here, we are looking at petitionary prayer from a philosophical perspective to see if we can make sense out of it. So, we should also address the argument as it is targeted *at*

³⁵ I conclude the argument with the conclusion “God does not exist” rather than the latter because it fits with Schellenberg’s argument better. Though, for the purpose of this paper, I think the latter is actually more accurate.

petitionary prayer, not simply *through* this phenomenon. So, we can revise the argument thus:

1. God exists.
2. God instituted the practice of petitionary prayer primarily to draw men closer to himself.
3. One does not experience God in the practice of petitionary prayer.
4. Petitionary prayer does not accomplish its intrinsic purpose.
5. Petitionary prayer is either a fraud or is useless.

I hope that cleared some things up—from here, then, I want to look at some ways that certain people have dealt with this problem and devise some unique solutions from their own writings and some from my own thoughts.

John writes, quoting Jesus, in his Gospel account:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (John 14:16-20).

And:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples (John 15:7-8).

For almost the entirety of this chapter, I want to look at what these statements mean and how they address this particular problem of hiddenness.

Aquinas and Oneness with God

In Aquinas's commentary on John, he makes note of the fact that Christ's "power was so hidden and his weakness so much veiled it over,"³⁶ that people could mistake him for just a simple human being. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul explains:

[Christ,] who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness (Phil. 2:6-7).

This is one key concept of the Christian faith, the *dual nature* of Christ. Christ was not only fully man, but he was also fully God. This was formally agreed upon by the church at the Council of Chalcedon. The Council declared that there was a "hypostatic union" between Christ's human and godlike nature in one real person.³⁷ This is the first point of this passage from John. Jesus states, "I am in the Father." However, it goes much farther than that.

First, by this statement, Christ not only meant that he shared divinity with the Father, he also meant that he and his Father literally were *one* with one another. "I am in the Father." At another place, Jesus states, "...the Father is in me..." (John 14:10). The Father and the son were united in perfect unity with one another. While Christ was on earth, he did not lose this connection with the Father. Although, as Aquinas explains, he "veiled" himself, in a sense. He did not

³⁶ Aquinas, "Tractates on the Gospel of John 112-24," *Fathers of the Church*, Trans. John W. Rettig (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

³⁷ Pace, Edward, "Hypostatic Union," *New Advent*, vol .7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm>>, accessed 22 March 2012.

actually cut off God's presence within him. He was always intimately connected to the Father.

The second point I want to make here is that Christ not only says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:10). He also states, "...and you [are] in me, and I in you." In another place, he goes on to explain, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them" (John 14:23). In his commentary on John 14, Aquinas explains:

The statement, and you in me, means that the disciples are in Christ... And with this meaning it is said that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). And I in you, remaining within you, and acting and indwelling within you by grace: "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17).³⁸

This partly demonstrates the concept of the Trinity, which is the idea of the unity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, it also shows us the idea of *humanity's* fellowship with God through both the Son and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is a mystery, but as Scripture says, "Jesus Christ is in you"³⁹ Ultimately, Jesus reveals that it was God's plan all along for man to be united with God. He states in some of his last words on earth, "I ask...that they [believers in Christ] may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:20-21). This is the first concept I want to convey here, this idea of unity between the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, redeemed human beings, his children.

³⁸ Aquinas, "John 14," *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1998):1928-1930, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/John14.htm> (accessed 20 March 2012).

³⁹ II Corinthians 13:5

Asking and Receiving and Communion with God

It is interesting that Jesus immediately follows his explanation of humanity's fellowship with God, his *oneness* with God with the claim "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). He not only does this here, but at many other points in the Gospel where he describes this "unity" with the Father. Here I want to look at the significance this unity with the Father has in asking and receiving from God, in petitionary prayer and at its relation to the proposition that one can simply "ask and receive" from the Father.

Why is it so important to have fellowship with the Father in order to petition the Father? Jesus says, "*If* you abide in me and I abide in you..." He does not guarantee that this will happen apart from this kind of relationship. Recall, also, the instance cited in Chapter 2 describing a Father and son relationship of asking and receiving.⁴⁰ The kinds of conditions we see here in order for one to ask and receive are both a deep abiding in and deep connection with the Father.

I believe this passage from 1 John will shed some light on this:

And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him (1 John 5:14).

When one accepts the Word of Christ, Christ comes to live inside that person. As a result, the Scripture reveals that there is an "inner transformation" that takes place. One no longer follows the spirit of the world or their sinful desires, but follows the Spirit of God. As such, one no longer does things that go against

⁴⁰ Go back to chapter 2 on the passage on the son asking his Father for a fish.

God's will, but do all things in accordance with God's will. This applies, then, to the issue of petitionary prayer. Once Christ comes to live inside someone, one petitions the Father "according to his will." It is in this way that one "abides" in the Son and the Father and thus knows that they will receive from the Father and then actually do.

From this passage, then, I think we can see that fellowship with the Father is something that occurs in God's children, in those who have accepted Christ's Word in them through faith. Further, we can see that this kind of fellowship is necessary for one to "ask and receive." One must first become one with the Father in order to petition the Father and actually expect to and receive from the Father.

The Problem of Hiddenness and John 14

One might be wondering at this point what the significance of this passage has to bear on the problem of hiddenness. For, the problem itself is, "Why are God's children not experiencing this fellowship with God, his abiding presence and his response to their petitions, when they engage in petitionary prayer?" Certainly there is an aspect in which God desires for us to seek him and to find him in this area of hiddenness.⁴¹ However, I think there is a much deeper problem at stake here. It is not just that God is growing us and inviting us to seek him, there is an actual problem. Indeed, the question is truly, "Why does what the Bible say should happen, not happen?" The answer to the problem of hiddenness

⁴¹ For example, in Proverbs it says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter and the glory of man to seek it out" and in the Gospels, there is parable of the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44).

should be clear, that premise three “One does not experience God in the practice of petitionary prayer,” is simply false. According to John’s account, we should be experiencing God. But then why do we not?

To answer this, I want to look back at the quote I originally started with,

My God, my God, why have you
forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do
not answer;
and by night, but I find no rest
(Psalm 22:1-2).

This passage is quoted by Jesus at his death. He cried out, as they crucified him, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” I think the answer to this question, why did Jesus believe that his God, God the Father, had forsaken him in his deepest hour of need will answer our question to this problem of hiddenness.

Two things are clear about this incident. Jesus, clearly, should never experience lack of fellowship with God. As John writes, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” At another point, John recounts Jesus saying, “...the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). Further, if anyone in all creation should have perfect communion with the Father, it is Jesus Christ. Although some of us stumble and lose fellowship with God, there is no reason that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, should. Why, then, did this happen?

The only answer I can give to this comes also from the Scriptures. When Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray, he tells them to ask God that “his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” I believe that this admonition to request this

reveals the secret behind God's hiddenness and Christ's own experience of God's hiddenness. It is the case in this world that there is an evil one and that this evil one is fighting against the kingdom of God. As such, there is a mixture of light and darkness in this world. I believe that when Christ was telling his disciples to pray this, "May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,"⁴² he was asking them to do this for this very reason. God's kingdom is come but we must fight for it and plead the Father for it to come on earth. Although it was never God's desire that he remain hidden and that his answers to our requests go unreceived (unless it is to bring us into deeper intimacy), it is nonetheless the case that he has asked us to continue asking and pleading for this to come about in our lives. We must ask, actually, for this scenario of "hiddenness" to be undone. When Christ was on the cross and experienced the "hiddenness" of God, I believe that he did so because, for one moment, the powers of darkness overshadowed the plan of God. It was at this point, that Christ felt the weight of God's "hiddenness" and cried out "Why have you forsaken me?"⁴³

Thus, my answer to the problem of hiddenness is this: God is not hidden. It is we who are hidden and blinded to God by the powers of darkness. Certainly there is an aspect in which this is part of our journey with God, coming more and more to see his light in phases and in tastes. And, as some writers point out, our blindness leads us to a deeper work of slow transformation through revelation,

⁴² Matt. 6:10, for one.

⁴³ See Pascal's argument from Schellenberg's book, pg. 132-133.

increasing our intimacy and eternal relationship with God and others.⁴⁴ However, in general, I do think this is ultimately a problem resulting from the presence of evil. We let evil in and it has ruined everything, particularly our relationship with God. We must continue to seek and petition God to come through in our world and reveal himself to us and establish “his kingdom.” It is true, we must ask God for the circumstances in which we can more truly ask and receive from him.

⁴⁴ See introduction in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*. Ed. Daniel Howard Snyder and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

In this paper, I have given a philosophical analysis of petitionary prayer. In my first chapter, I show that there is a distinct difference between the two schemas behind petitionary prayer and behind philosophy. The mindset of one who engages in petitionary prayer is one that is accustomed to the spirit of God and operates in what we denoted as a “spiritual” mindset. The mindset of one in philosophy is naturally at odds with this mindset for it concerns itself with things of the world, those things that are unspiritual.

In the second chapter, I give an explanation of the practice of petitionary prayer according to church tradition and Biblical teaching, in addition to some teachings from some church fathers. I note here the importance of coming to God “like a child” in prayer, the place of hope and perseverance in prayer, the very personal nature of prayer, and, finally, what it means when one does not “receive” what one asks for.

Following this chapter, I introduce the philosophical problems I address in this paper, the problem of divine providence and free will, the problem of God’s goodness, and the problem of hiddenness. I also show the significance of key philosophical concepts to each of these problems and their relation to the larger “problem of evil” that pervades much of philosophical rhetoric.

The following three chapters focus each on one particular problem. For the problem of free will and divine providence, I give a partial Molinist account of

middle knowledge and how this works with God's divine providence and the reality of free will. I show that, given this understanding of God's middle knowledge—his knowledge of contingent truths that are not based on his own will—there is the possibility of free will and divine providence. Thus, the practice of petitionary prayer rests on true assumptions when it assumes both of these things.

For the problem of God's goodness, I looked at God's particular system of "asking and receiving" from Eleonore Stump's paper, "Petitionary Prayer." Here she draws up an argument against petitionary prayer that is based on the idea that this practice is inherently not a good system. One could simply receive from God without asking him and generate better results. I show in this chapter that this system of asking and receiving includes at least one beautiful component and that is its utilization of imagination. When one engages in the practice of petitionary prayer, one is engaging in God's imagination through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is a beautiful process and one worthy of God's creation and institution.

Lastly, I look at the problem of hiddenness. In this, the problem concerns God's apparent distance and our blindness to him. How can God allow this if he wants us to come to know him, most basically, and also to grow in intimacy with Him? I answer this problem with, essentially, an acknowledgement that there is this distance from God but that this is not God's intention. Drawing from primarily John the Apostle, I show the importance God places on communion in the practice of petitionary prayer. God desires that we be in intimate relationship with him. The problem is not with God but with us. Humanity is in sin and the

world is full of evil. This is why we experience difficulty in experiencing God. Although he grows us in this place of weakness, it is nonetheless not his original intention.

I desire that this paper alleviates some doubts and concerns one might hold in one's mind concerning the "reasonableness" of prayer. I hope to have shown that the philosophical problems raised against this practice of petitionary do not pose a problem to this practice of petitionary prayer. Although I know I have not addressed every allegation contained in each of these problems or against petitionary prayer, in general, I think I have shown at least some things that give one reason to believe that petitionary prayer is not a fruitless or "silly" exercise. Indeed, it is an act of faith, but an act of faith based in deep understanding and awareness.

Furthermore, I hope that this paper have shown people that petitionary prayer is, simply, a very good thing. I desire that everyone comes to know God in the way I have experienced him in this practice. I have read and interpreted and practiced, at least to some extent, each of the things I have presented here and want to truly exhort the reader take part in this practice with the rest of the body of Christ. If the case is that the reader is not part of the body of Christ, I would enjoin him or her to seek out truth in this subject. The Lord will reveal himself to you as you seek him.

I know that God has used this work to his glory and used my gifts, both of the spirit and of the earth to proclaim his truth. May God be glorified and may all come to know him in Spirit and in truth.

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