

“Who Art in Heaven”

Introduction: You’ve probably either seen a picture, or some kind of video footage, that shows a small fighter plane re-fueling while still up in the air. Hovering above this smaller plane is a “mother plane” with a huge reserve of fuel. The little plane has to fly close enough to the mother plane so that a nozzle can be dropped and connect to begin the refueling process. If it flies too low and does not connect, it will run out of fuel and eventually crash. Conversely, if it flies too high it will run into the mother plane and end up in flames.

This image helpfully captures the importance of prayer in our lives. Without prayer, we will either be too empty of divine energy, or too full of ourselves. We will either lose connection with the living God, or come to think that somehow, we are not that different from this God. Either way we will crash. And so it reminds us that what we need to live well, so that we don’t crash, comes from elsewhere. It comes, Jesus says in his teaching on prayer, from our Father who art in heaven.

We began looking at Jesus’ teaching on prayer last week and will continue to do so through this season of Lent, especially as we think about how prayer helps us grow in our relationship with God and hence, “grow up in our salvation” (1 Pe. 2:2), becoming mature in the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Jesus’ teaching on prayer comes in response to a request from his followers, “Lord, teach us to pray . . .” (Lk 11:1). It consists of an outline for prayer which we’ve come to know as the Lord’s Prayer. We want to explore it slowly so that we might pray it thoughtfully, allowing each phrase to help prime, or continue, a conversation with the Lord of heaven and earth.

As we considered “our Father” last week, we saw how the title “Father” identifies God as our creator and redeemer, or rescuer. We also noted the communal, family nature of the prayer and how this can encourage us to pray about how the church can be an extended family in an age when many are searching for that kind of close, caring connection. As I’ve prayed this, I do think that our gifts as a church include our inter-generational nature, as well as our willingness to serve. Thus, I wonder how each of us can serve one another as we seek to be family to those around us, and how that might speak attractively to those outside of this family of faith.

As we move on to the next phrase of the prayer, we see that the one whom Jesus instructs us to call “Father” is a *heavenly*, and not an *earthly*, father. How might that help us in this conversation we call prayer? Let’s consider three P’s: perfection, perspective, and power, that we meet in Psalm 33, a prayer about the greatness and goodness of the God who has made, and who watches over, all.

I. Perfection

A. In the first place, then, the God to whom we pray is perfect. Consider this comment from Psalm 115:16, which we shared earlier in our Responsive Reading: “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to mankind” (v. 16). While there is not a whole lot the Bible says about heaven, we do see here that heaven is God’s dimension of reality and earth is our dimension. We also learn that when, in God’s new creation, the dimensions of heaven and earth are joined, the “old order” of death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more, nor will there be any darkness (Rev. 21:4; 22:5). That is because our earthly dimension of reality is filled with sin, but God’s dimension has none of that. God’s dimension is perfect, and, by implication, so is the God who inhabits it. One description of God’s

perfection is found in Psalm 33:4-5. There God is described as one whose word is right and true, who is faithful in all he does, and whose love is unfailing.

B. The question is, as we pray, does that matter? Well, what if God woke up today and said to himself, “Gee, I feel little grouchy today; who can I zap?” Or what if God thought, “As I’ve slept on it, I realized I made a mistake answering Margaret in that way. She asked to be healed, not held!” Is this someone you would feel confident about? Would you open your life to this God in prayer? Particularly in an age which is being called “post-truth,” when our leaders are constructing their own reality, molding the facts like Play-Doh to fit their own ends, it is so helpful to know that the God with whom we converse in prayer is dependable, just, faithful, consistent, and that his word is right and true. Because he is perfect, we can always count on his character when we seek to connect with him in prayer.

II. Perspective

A. Second, the God to whom we pray has the ultimate perspective on life and circumstances. Listen to vv. 13-15: “From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do.” That’s quite a perspective. It means that the God to whom we pray not only sees us, but, because he is not hindered by the categories of time and space that mark our human existence, has what we might call a “wide-angle” perspective, vs. our more “telephoto” view of the world and our life.

Illustration: In contrast to our much smaller lakes in New England, Lake Michigan is a huge: nearly 100 miles across and over 300 hundred miles north to south. Among other things, this means that some pretty rough weather and water conditions can arise. One sailor, who is also a pilot, says that when he encounters such stormy weather, especially when it includes thunder, lightning, gale force winds, and very choppy waves, he imagines he is in his airplane. As you might imagine, a flight over Lake Michigan offers a very different perspective. If you’ve ever looked down from the vantage point of the air, the Lake is crossed in matter of minutes. “Skipping over the pond” is how pilots describe it. When things get really rough on the water, this fellow imagines himself having a wider view from which the weather seems more than manageable. This in turn enables him to keep going and to persevere.

B. The God to whom we pray has this kind of perspective. He is the one who “gathers the waters of the sea into jars” (v. 7). When we’re struggling with an illness, when we have a wayward child or challenging spouse, when we’re experiencing difficulty at work or at school, we can go to the one who has a much wider perspective, the perspective of eternity, and seek his encouragement and guidance. Even when we don’t understand, we can be sure he does. We can lean on him (cf. Pv. 3:5).

III. Power

A. Of course, it would not do us much good if this God who has such a wide-angle perspective didn’t also have ultimate power, for then he wouldn’t be able to do much about what he observes. But our psalm reveals that the LORD who is both perfect, and has ultimate perspective, also has ultimate power. In v. 16-19 we read about the size of an army and the strength of a warrior and the power of a warhorse (the latest and greatest in military technology) cannot really save, but that the LORD who looks on from heaven is able to deliver from famine, and even death. The challenge for us is that he doesn’t always act according to our timing, and so we hear the psalmist at the end calling us to wait on the LORD in hope, trusting in his unfailing love; such is confirmed for us in his death and resurrection.

B. It reminds me of that time when the disciples were out in a boat and a furious storm came up. Giant waves broke over the boat and filled it with water such that it almost swamped. The disciples, all seasoned fishermen, were scared out of their wits. Jesus was with them, but he was still asleep, in the stern of the boat! They woke him up, accusing him of not caring for them: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (Mk. 4:38). That, perhaps, is one of the most profound questions of human existence. Does God care about my problems? Is he concerned about my stress, my hurts, my rejections, my financial struggles, my country, my desires for the future? "Why are you so afraid?" Jesus asks. He wasn't asleep because he didn't care about the disciples or couldn't do anything about their issues. He was asleep because he had a different, ultimate perspective on their life; he wanted them to learn to trust him, to grow in him, and to not let fear rule their lives.

The Father to whom we pray is in heaven. He is faithful and truthful and can be counted on. He has a wide-angle perspective on reality. He has the power to overcome even death.