

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Sometimes the old gets so old that it is assumed, taken for granted, and finally neglected. In this way, things that are core principle – things that are cornerstone and foundational – can actually go unnoticed until a generation arises that no longer knows the foundation. It is not taught or mentioned anymore. For so many generations, it has been assumed that it is obvious – that everyone knows it – until it is forgotten.

It would be interesting to gather our nominations for which central principles are most neglected and forgotten by our society at this present time. The fun, of course, is that forgotten truth can be rediscovered. The people who discover it afresh will be changed, converted, enthralled, transformed – and just as excited about it all as their ancient forebears were when they first encountered the same truth long ago.

With the first word of the Lord's Prayer, as we have seen, Jesus shocked His contemporaries and required of His disciples a relationship and an approach to God that was scandalous in its intimacy, its affectionate trust, its presumptuousness on God's personal and individual love. Saying this prayer, every believer started out affirming: "I believe in God's personal, powerful, eternal love for me!" You see? The church's developing doctrines of grace, forgiveness, mercy – the very core of the Gospel – were not being invented by Paul. Rather, backed by the Cross and the Resurrection, and because the church was praying the Lord's Prayer individually and together day by day, these concepts were growing clearer all the time.

Today, of course, the theory of God's love – not its reality, not the experience of God's love, but the *theory* of God's love – is so familiar, and has been for so many generations, that it actually bores some people. What created the greatest spiritual revolution in the history of mankind and changed life on this globe on every level of reality is now, in terms of mere theory and concept, so familiar that many people would rather garden or ski than gather to talk about it. We "remember" that for three hundred years (and off and on since), countless people were literally willing to risk their lives to come together to talk about this incredible love of God and what was happening to them because they had discovered it.

Not the experience, but the *theory* of God's love is "old hat" today. We do not always believe it inside ourselves where it matters, but we take the outer intellectual concept so much for granted that we even get angry if someone hints that there might be anything left of God's judgment or wrath. What right does God have to set standards, to require anything from us, to discipline or correct us if we go astray? It is God's job to love. No matter what we do to God, to God's creation, or to each other, it is God's job to love and forgive; anything else is none of God's business! If we wreck all the ecological systems and then starve to death, is that not the wrath of God? That's exactly what the ancients meant by the wrath of God. Get and stay in harmony with God's ways and the ways God does things ... or perish.

So in the opening word of this prayer, Jesus gives us the brand new, and that is now old to us. Then Jesus returns to the old – the core tradition and heritage – for the second phrase. And that is quite new to us. It was old, assumed, and taken for granted in Jesus' time, but it may seem like the newest dimension of the prayer for us: *Hallowed be thy name*. What in the world does that mean? Not only do we know it means something, but because it is in this prayer – this prayer that is the distilled essence of everything Jesus did and meant and came to reveal to us – we know that it is one of the most important principles of life. It is also more than words. It is an act; a motion we must make; a part of the WAY we are trying to walk because Jesus is our Master, our Teacher/Guide. We are beginning to learn that a prayer is not just a request tossed into the sky. A prayer is a way of being – a way we align our lives to what we believe and what we expect, and to the God we trust.

Part of Jesus' genius is the way He mixed new and old, bringing new out of old yet not discarding the old. Jesus loved and honored His Jewish tradition so well that the most powerful heresies could not break Christianity away from it. The Old Testament is still Christian Scripture, for instance, despite Marcionism. Jesus always built on the foundations others had laid. Let me take a few moments to illustrate.

In the synagogue service, there were three prayers solemnly recited at every meeting: the *Shema*, the *Kaddish*, and the *Shemone Esreh* (Eighteen Benedictions). The *Shema* even *we* know: "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.*" (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The *Kaddish* has two parts. The first says: “*May his great name be magnified and hallowed in the world, which he has made according to his will, and may his kingly rule be established in your lifetime – in your time and in the time of the whole house of Israel. May the name of the Lord be praised from now on and forever. May the prayer and petition of all Israel find acceptance before our Father who is in heaven.*”

Put into your mind the picture of Jesus reciting this, along with His friends and neighbors, from the time He was a little boy – and of course, still doing so as we find Him attending synagogue in the Gospels. The affinities with the Lord’s Prayer are obvious.

Then comes the *Shemone Esreh*, or Eighteen Benedictions (the form of which has changed over the years). Not only was this prayer recited by the congregation at every service, but every pious person was supposed to say it individually three times a day, which is probably why the early church adopted the custom of saying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Because of the length of the prayer, permission was sometimes given to use only two or three petitions at one service instead of all eighteen. While the later petitions vary more from age to age, the early petitions are ancient and quite standard. I will only include the first seven here. Remember that Jesus would be praying these petitions probably three times a day through all His formative years.

1.) *Blessed be thou, O Lord, our God and God of our fathers; God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a mighty and faithful God, a most high God, Creator of heaven and earth, our shield and shield of our fathers, our confidence in all generations. Blessed be thou, O Lord, the shield of Abraham.*

2.) *Thou art a mighty one who humbles the strong and judges the mighty, the ever-living God who raises the dead, who causes the wind to blow and the dew to fall, who cherishes the living and makes the dead to live. Blessed be thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead.* [Somebody was explaining to me only the other day that Jesus was important because He told us about life after death. That is utter nonsense. Judaism had believed in life after death for at least a thousand years before Jesus, and probably for two thousand.]

3.) *Holy and fearful is thy name, and there is no God beside thee. Blessed be thou, O Lord, the holy God.*

4.) *Bestow on us, our Father, knowledge of thee and insight and understanding out of thy Law. Blessed be thou, O Lord, who givest knowledge.*

5.) *Bring us back to thee, O Lord, that we may return in repentance. Blessed be thou, O Lord, who has pleasure in repentance.*

6.) *Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned against thee; blot out our transgressions from before thine eyes, for great is thy mercy. Blessed be thou, O Lord, who forgivest much.*

7.) *Look on our misery and prosper our cause, and deliver us for thy name's sake. Blessed be thou, O Lord, deliverer of Israel.*

Clearly Jesus' prayer, while new and startling in some ways, is also coming out of His heritage and tradition. Jesus has distilled and focused it all to amazing brevity for His followers. Yet if we do not feel the Jewish tradition behind it, we cannot fully grasp its content.

I would now refer you to familiar phrases coming from comic books and movies of only a few years ago. A policeman would bang on the door, saying, "Open up in the name of the law." Or instructions would come to the dashing hero in the movie, telling him to "Take this signet ring to the Duke of Cornwall and bid him ride with all of his men to Devonshire, in the name of the king." Robin Hood was forever doing things in the name of King Richard, and his enemies were doing other things in the name of King John. And more than one fair knight fought and lived or died "For Arthur, and for England!"

It has only been a few generations since we forgot the meaning of names. Not *all* of us have forgotten, even yet, but through all prior history, everything was always done "in the name" of something or someone. Certainly this is at the core of Judaism. In our Scripture passage today, I read to you about the incident of Moses meeting God and finally requiring at least a piece of God's name. How could Moses go on – to serve, or to call others to commit themselves to the impossible venture – if he could not do so in a name? How could he continue if he could not call upon a NAME? "God," I remind you, is not a name. "God" is a title. "God" refers to a position, like Judge or Doctor or Reverend – only of course higher, whatever anybody may try to tell you. But "God" does not identify which god, any more than Judge identifies which judge.

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Out of respect, Judaism almost never spoke the name of God given to Moses. The High Priest knew the name and used it in the Holy of Holies once a year. A name that high carries too much power, too much danger. It is not to be fooled around with. You go flinging it around and there is no telling what might happen! So it is pointed to from afar with respect and reverence, and we use endless words that merely point toward this name and the ONE behind it: Lord, Almighty, Higher Power, Great Spirit, Elohim, King of Heaven, Lord of Hosts, and on and on.

“Hallowed be thy name” within the Lord’s Prayer is a reiteration of sacred Jewish belief and the first three commandments. God is holy (different). Any effort to bring God into concrete form or image is idolatry. Judaism properly saw itself doing all things in the name of God, yet holding even this name in such awe and reverence that they would hardly dare to breathe even its partial form or sound out loud. *Hallowed* – sacred, holy – *be thy name*.

At the very apex of Jewish history, Moses says, “What is your name?” I have to know. I cannot go on this Mission Impossible and talk to the slaves in Egypt or defy Pharaoh without some name of power. Forgive me, but I have to ask. I have to know: What is your name?

The Covenant begins with the Commandments, and the Commandments start out with that name – written in such a way that neophytes do not even realize it is a name. Do you know how the Ten Commandments begin? (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) By the way, the Ten Commandments are to Judaism what the Lord’s Prayer is to Christianity.

So Jesus gives us His prayer. The first word calls us to the most intimate, trusting, affectionate relationship with God. The numinous, almighty, eternal Spirit is to be approached as Daddy (*Abba*). And in the very next phrase, the prayer says, “Don’t you dare forget who *Abba* really is!” This is one of the most incredible, powerful, paradoxical counterbalances there is: Daddy, of the hallowed name.

Ask for anything, for everything – but do not dare to presume anything. Trust, relax, play, enjoy every moment you get to spend with *Abba*. And never forget that this is nevertheless a BEING beyond your comprehension; who speaks and it comes to be; who calls the worlds into being; who tracks the lives of every single individual in the Los Angeles basin all the time and simultaneously – and perhaps all

those on a hundred thousand other worlds we do not even know about yet. And this same God has purpose and plan and destiny for all of it – for all of *us* – all of it coordinated, interacting, and changing and growing all the time. Daddy, of the hallowed name!

Bring the tension to its peak and keep it there: the four-year-old running to the outstretched arms of *Abba* ... and the numinous majesty before whom all human words recoil. Bring the paradox to full consciousness and keep it there. Pray with both awarenesses at full power. Do not be afraid – and do not be a wiseacre. Know you are loved, and do not hold back your own affection. Do not play rebellious games, act disrespectful, or think you can live your own way by your own rules and never have to encounter or deal with the nameless ONE.

The concept of the hallowed name is behavior-oriented too, of course. All that we do, we do in the name of this God. All that we do, then, is to show our reverence and respect for this name. Our hope is that by our actions, all others will also eventually come to honor and bless and revere this name. How can we honor God, our Creator, except by the way we live? The Presence is with us always (if we notice), but we also know that one day, between this dimension and the next, there will come a more clear meeting, where we will stand before our Creator and more fully comprehend. And we will say: “This is what you made me – the gifts you gave me, the assignments you handed me, as nearly as I could understand – and this is what I have done with it all. *Hallowed be thy name*. This is how holy Your Name has been for me.”

It brings us to the precept which is so old that, for many of us, it is now new again. There is a thing about life here in this world that tends to get and keep us self-centered. Even when we get “religious,” it continues. We get focused on: What do I believe? Am I pleased and satisfied with God’s performance? Do I like God’s precepts and commandments, and which ones shall I obey? Which religion, which church, which theology, which descriptions of the meaning and purpose do I like, do I approve of, etc.? This is all necessary, of course, to some degree. But what an attitude it also engenders. And if it is a stage we have to go through, it is not where we can afford to stay. It is not worshipful!

What name is hallowed for you? That is, when do you stop asking questions and stop acting like judge and jury? When or where do you finally meet some God and submit, recognize holiness, realize

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superiority, begin to humble your own spirit – begin to worship?
Before what God do you bow in submission and adoration and praise?
In respect and reverence and obedience?

It is an old thing – so old it is brand new for many moderns,
who have never ever truly worshipped anything. Some even think it is
a mark of strength and intelligence never to bow, instead of being sure
evidence of blindness and lostness.

The day we come to worship is the day life begins. The day we
discover the real existence of a God greater than we are is the day
when life starts to matter. Before what God do you bow – in submission?
What God do you serve – in humility? What God do you worship –
in adoration?

Abba, hallowed be thy name.