

LESSON 2

PRAYER IN SALVATION HISTORY

BACKGROUND READING



When our heart responds to the invitation from the heart of God to enter into a relationship with Him, we have entered into a covenant. As we saw in the last lesson, a covenant is a sacred and holy agreement that God makes with His people. God fosters this relationship of prayer with His people throughout Salvation History. By observing the development of prayer in the Old Testament figures of Abraham and Moses, we can see how this covenantal relationship of prayer reaches its fulfillment through the prayer of Jesus Christ.

Prayer Is a Covenant Drama

The *Catechism* calls prayer a covenant drama. These are powerful words that arise from the history of God's people and their interaction with Him. God thirsts for His people and calls them; men and women hear His call and they respond in faith. God forges a relationship with His people that is a covenant, a faithful agreement between them. The drama is the story of this relationship as it unfolds in history. We can read the series of events in the Old Testament, where God pursues a people that constantly breaks its covenant

to Him through pride and sin. But God is ever faithful to His people and never stops thirsting for them. This drama culminates in the New Testament with the ultimate sacrifice of God's own beloved Son on the Cross. All throughout this covenant drama, particular figures exemplify the relationship between God and the soul, and serve as models for how we can develop our relationship with God.

We Pray Because We Trust in God

From the time of creation God called those whom He had created into a relationship with Him, and He does this first through the Jewish people. Our Faith singles out God's relationship with Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people, as the start of the drama of prayer: "But it is above all beginning with our father Abraham that prayer is revealed in the Old Testament" (CCC 2569).

God told Abram at the age of 75 to pack up all his things and to move away from his family and country. Notice that, as always, God is the one who takes the first step. God called and

Abram responded in faith, doing as God asked: “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (Genesis 12:4). This call and response is the act of prayer. To have an attentive heart that follows the will of God is essential to prayer.

God established a covenant with Abram, changing his name to Abraham. God promised that He would make Abraham “the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5) so that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (cf. Genesis 15:5). This must have stretched Abraham’s faith as he was an old man and his wife beyond childbearing years. Here we see part of the drama of prayer: “the test of faith in the fidelity of God” (CCC 2570). To have an intimate relationship with someone requires trust, and God desires that we have absolute trust in His promise, even if at first it seems impossible or if it doesn’t happen on our schedule.

God kept His promise to Abraham by giving him a son, Isaac, as well as promised that through him Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars. God went further to test Abraham’s faith: He commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son to Him. We read in the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son because of his great faith in God: “[Abraham] considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead” (Hebrew 11:19). Abraham had faith that God would keep this promise to give him descendants through Isaac, even though now it seemed impossible. We see in Scripture how God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, but God does not spare His own Son. Abraham becomes for us the picture of our heavenly Father, who will offer up His Son for all people to be saved (cf. Romans 8:32).

Abraham shows us that prayer requires faith in the living God, and when we respond in faith we become part of God’s great plan. Abraham’s great trust in God’s promise, His covenant, shows us how God rewards those who trust in Him and acknowledges that everything that God gives us is a gift. For this reason Abraham is called the Father of our Faith.

We Pray for Others

The drama of prayer continues in the life of Moses, whom God chose to lead the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and to whom God gave the Ten Commandments. Moses becomes for us the picture of the one who prays for God’s people. Again it is God who first calls: “From the midst of the burning bush he calls Moses” (CCC 2575). God calls Moses to be His messenger to bring liberation to His people. During this call, Moses learns how to pray. He debates, questions, and makes excuses, saying, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). Moses enters into a conversation with God: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a person speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). Of all the forms of prayer, Moses models most clearly for us the roles of mediator or intercessor. A mediator or intercessor is one who prays to God for others. The most striking example is when Moses begs that God forgive the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf. Moses intercedes for his people, begging God, “Turn from your burning wrath; change your mind about punishing your people” (Exodus 32:12). God hears his prayer and spares His people through Moses’ intercession. Moses is the forerunner of Jesus Christ, who with

His coming, becomes for all times “the one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5).

Jesus Fulfills the Drama of Prayer

The drama of prayer is fully revealed to us in Jesus. Jesus’ will is in complete conformity with His Father’s will. One of the most poignant episodes in Jesus’ life that exemplifies the drama of prayer—the dialogue and surrender to the Father’s will—is in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). God the Father allowed His only Son to die on the Cross for the salvation of mankind. So great is God’s love for us that He makes the sacrifice He spared Abraham. God the Father did not desire His Son’s death, but He knew that fallen humanity’s response to Jesus’ call to radical conversion of heart would be to put Him to death. Jesus knew this

and had foretold His death to His disciples, but they did not understand. They did not yet know that “for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26), even raising the dead to life.

Through Jesus, our sins are forgiven and only His Blood opened the gates of Heaven for us. By His sacrifice, Jesus acts as the sole mediator between the Father and humankind. Jesus initiates a relationship with us, and carries our prayers to the Father, and so He says, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you” (John 15:16). Only by imitating Jesus do we pray as we should. Jesus is the one who teaches us to call God “Our Father,” which we will explore more deeply in a later lesson. Through Jesus, we know that we can trust our Father in all things, even if, at times, God’s promise seems impossible. This trust in God’s promise can only be developed in a life of prayer, when we lift our hearts and our minds to God.