

The Larger Catechism

Question 192

192. Q. What do we pray for in the third petition?

A. In the third petition, (which is, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven,[1235]) acknowledging, that by nature we and all men are not only utterly unable and unwilling to know and do the will of God,[1236] but prone to rebel against his Word,[1237] to repine and murmur against his providence,[1238] and wholly inclined to do the will of the flesh, and of the devil:[1239] we pray, that God would by his Spirit take away from ourselves and others all blindness,[1240] weakness,[1241] indisposedness,[1242] and perverseness of heart;[1243] and by his grace make us able and willing to know, do, and submit to his will in all things,[1244] with the like humility,[1245] cheerfulness,[1246] faithfulness,[1247] diligence,[1248] zeal,[1249] sincerity,[1250] and constancy,[1251] as the angels do in heaven.[1252]

Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[1235] **Matthew 6:10.** Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. [1236] **Romans 7:18.** For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. **Job 21:14.** Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. **1 Corinthians 2:14.** But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. [1237] **Romans 8:7.** Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. [1238] **Exodus 17:7.** And he called the name of the place Massah, and Meribah, because of the chiding of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying, Is the LORD among us, or not? **Numbers 14:2.** And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! [1239] **Ephesians 2:2.** Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. [1240] **Ephesians 1:17-18.** That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints. [1241] **Ephesians 3:16.** That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man. [1242] **Matthew 26:40-41.** And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. [1243] **Jeremiah 31:18-19.** I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth. [1244] **Psalms 119:1, 8, 35-36.** Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.... I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.... Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight. Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness. **Acts 21:14.** And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. [1245] **Micah 6:8.** He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? [1246] **Psalms 100:2.** Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. **Job 1:21.** And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. **2 Samuel 15:25-26.** And the king said unto Zadok, Carry back the ark of God into the city: if I shall find favour in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me again, and show me both it, and his habitation: But if he thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let him do to me as seemeth good unto him. [1247] **Isaiah 38:3.** And said, Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore. [1248] **Psalms 119:4-5.** Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes! [1249] **Romans 12:11.** Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord. [1250] **Psalms 119:80.** Let my heart be sound in thy statutes; that I be not ashamed. [1251] **Psalms 119:112.** I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end. [1252] **Isaiah 6:2-3.** Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. **Psalms 103:20-21.** Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure. **Matthew 18:10.** Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

Introduction

We are all well aware of what the third petition is: **Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.** What exactly does it mean? Too often, it serves as a segue to the fourth petition. That must not be the predominant desire of the heart. The first three petitions are very important because they prepare our hearts to correctly pray for our daily bread. The things of God, heaven, His glory and will must come first in our hearts. As Herman Witsius noted that this petition comes right after asking that God's kingdom would come; that is, as the King's kingdom comes, so the King's will be done.

In the third petition, we are asking that God's will would be done here "as it is in heaven." What "will" are we praying for? Witsius believes the petition contains both senses of God's will. He says, "In both sense of the word, we pray, 'Thy will be done,' but not in the same manner."¹ With this, Ridgley and Vos agree.² The LC speaks of both God's Word and providence whereas the SC (#103) is not as specific.

The first three sections we cover in this lesson help us to understand why we so need to earnestly pray the third petition. The remaining parts of the LC explain the nature of this petition. At first, the petition seemed so simple but we will find much more is involved that what first meets the eye.

Utterly Unable and Unwilling

The third petition implies that God's will is not always done. Though His decretive will always prevail, yet His revealed will often finds resistance. That is why the petition is so important. Many resist God's revealed will. So the LC states that, in the petition, we are "**acknowledging, that by nature we and all men are not only utterly unable and unwilling to know and do the will of God...**" Of course the Lord's Prayer assumes man has fallen. As such, all men by nature are unable to know and do God's will. Our sinful nature has so blinded us that we are not able to know God's will ("*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*" 1Cor. 2:14) Paul says that in our flesh "nothing good dwells in me" (οἶδα γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ οἰκεῖ ἐν ἐμοί, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου, ἀγαθόν).³ In that condition, we are not able to truly understand God's will. Furthermore, not only are we *unable*, we are also *unwilling* to know and do the will of God. "Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." (Job 21:14) How many times have we ourselves closed our ears to the truth because we did not want to hear what it might demand of us? We are unable and unwilling to do God's will.

Ridgley wisely pointed out that this petition also assumes that we must know the will of God before we can obey it. God has made that law known.

¹ Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1839), 251ff.

² Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 2:626-627. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, 559.

³ Literally, "For I know that no good thing (οὐκ... ἀγαθόν) dwells in me, that is in my flesh."

Hence, his law has been promulgated; particularly as it was written by God on the heart of man at first, in such legible characters that our apostasy from him has not wholly erased it. But besides this, there must be an internal impression made on the minds and consciences of men, whereby they may be brought to see the excellency and glory of the law, and their indispensable obligation to yield obedience to it.⁴

Our aversion to God's law is expressed quite fully in Rom. 1:18ff. (we dealt with that passage numerous times in our studies). That is what aggravates our offences, our sins. Enough creeps out to make us inexcusable but not enough to direct us (because of our depravity).

Prone to Rebel and Murmur

The previous clause stated that “all men are not *only* utterly unable and unwilling...” It is one thing to not know but quite another thing to continually rebel against it. Here, the divines list both aspects of God's will, His Word and providence: “**but prone to rebel against his Word, to repine and murmur against his providence...**” First of all, we are prone to rebel against his Word — that is, our instinct and habit is to perversely rebel against His revealed will. Paul says, “*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.*” (Rom. 8:7) By nature, our flesh will not submit to God's law, in fact, it cannot (for it is not able, οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναται). When we do come into contact with God's Word, we rebel against it. This is our natural tendency without the Spirit.

Men can never really know the will of God by human reason, science, or philosophy, nor can they ever really do the will of God until their hearts have been renewed by the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. Thus when we pray ‘Thy will be done,’ this implies, first of all, a prayer for the special work of the Holy Spirit in human minds and hearts. (Vos, 559)

Before going further, we must remember why we are presenting this point. The third petition recognizes that our disposition by nature rebels against His Word so we must remember this when we pray. We request much in this petition because we resist His will so thoroughly. His Word confronts our sinful nature and our wicked hearts instinctively resist it. Isn't this the very thing over which we believers grieve? Are we not both surprised and saddened by our proneness to rebel against His Word? “O Lord, may your will be done in my heart because it too often resists your Word; I am prone to resist the Word I love, the God I serve, the Lord who loves me.”

Perhaps we see our resistance to God's will most acutely in terms of His providence. We are “**prone ...to repine and murmur against his providence...**” God's will concretely gripping our lives reveals the theology of our hearts. In the OT, we read of Israel's murmuring against God (Ex. 17:7; Num. 14:2; Deut. 1:27; Ps. 106:25). They did not like what God was doing in their lives. He saved them and protected them but they wanted more and He did not comply with their terms of existence.

We can theologically declare God does all things well but we often reveal our heretical hearts when His providence does not meet with our approval. This is a very common sin even among

⁴ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2:625.

believers. Vos's comments are very perceptive.

People wrongly suppose that God *owes* them happiness, prosperity, good health, and other blessings, and that if any of these are taken away from them, God is cheating them of their just rights. While a Christian will of course realize that all such attitudes are wicked, he will also realize that such thoughts do arise in his own heart, and will be humbled because of them. (Vos, 560)

The Flesh and the Devil

The last assumption underneath the third petition is explained by the LC in these terms: **“and wholly inclined to do the will of the flesh, and of the devil...”** This unflattering assessment has ample support in Scripture and its teaching on original sin proves the point. Man in his fallen condition is cannot do good. This inability towards good does not mean an inactivity towards sin. In fact, the bent of our desires and affections are “wholly inclined” to the thing contrary to God’s will — that it, our nature’s proclivity bends to “the will of the flesh, and of the devil.” Paul says that we followed the “course of this world” (Eph. 2:2, κατὰ τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) which literally means “according to the age of this world” — “this age” (1:21)⁵ represents all that our generation pursues in its fallen fleshly human condition and existence. A life dominated by this world, this horizon, this age, etc. is contrary to God’s will. Before redemption, we were trapped and willing participants of this worldly pursuits — our nature was to do the will of the flesh, the will of this age, the will of our fallen nature. To pray therefore “Thy will be done...” is a revolutionary petition because that is not how we lived.

This isn’t too difficult to understand in our experience. It is easier to lose our temper than to show self-control; it is easier to feed our desires than to deny ourselves; etc. We were wholly inclined to those things but now we are asking that God’s will be done. In a sense, this petition can be compared to an act of desperation and disappointment — we have grown tired of our ways and we have grown very dissatisfied with what we pursued.

The LC also adds that we are **“wholly inclined to do the will... of the devil.”** Once again, the same verse expounds this point: “we walked according to the ruler of authority/power of the air” (“prince of the power of the air”, κατὰ τὸν ἄρχοντα τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος). Paul adds that the same spirit is *now* working in the sons of disobedience (τοῦ νῦν ἐνεργοῦντος ἐν τοῖς υἱοῖς τῆς ἀπειθείας). It is bad enough that we walked willingly with this world. Now we are told that we in fact followed the ruler (τὸν ἄρχοντα) of this age. We have already touched upon this in our previous studies so it is sufficient enough to note that a malevolent spirit prompts and drags us along — we were willing subjects (“you once walked” ποτε περιπατήσατε). “Those outside of Christ are not only subject to the pervasive bondage of the present evil age; they are also inspired and empowered by personal evil forces. Paul depicts the second hostile influence as a powerful

⁵ Lincoln translates the phrase as “in accordance with this world-age.” In Eph. 1:21, Paul utilizes the phrase “in this age” (ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ) and in Gal. 1:4 he uses the phrase, “from the present evil age” (ἐκ τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦ ἐνεστώτος πονηροῦ). As is well known, Paul works with a “two age” structure — this present age and the age to come. Age here is not a reference to demons (contra F. F. Bruce in the NICNT); Lincoln’s argument is decisive here.

supernatural being who rules over this host of evil spirits: *the ruler of the kingdom of the air.*⁶

So We Pray the Following

Given our nature and tendency, this petition becomes utterly necessary. If this sense of need does not cling to our bones, as it were, then the petition will be at best rote and we will most certainly pray inappropriately. The structure in the LC answer helps us to see clearly what this petition is all about. The answer tells us what we are **by nature**. Then we pray **that God would by his Spirit take away** certain tendencies and that **by his grace make us able and willing to do His will** with the right heart. By nature we won't do His will so we need God to take away the reluctance of our hearts and we need God to enable us to do His will. Surely all saints have felt these very things in their hearts. In this third petition, there has to be a clear awareness of our need to do God's will. We are not cheering God on to fulfill His purpose in the world as if we were spectators. The third petition includes us! God's will must regulate and direct us as well. We do not pray this petition as outsiders. The third petition confronts the petitioner so that he or she might do the very thing implied the Lord's Prayer.

That God Would Take Away

The following items for which we pray in the third petition actually expose our utter feebleness and sinfulness: **“we pray, that God would by his Spirit take away from ourselves and others all blindness, weakness, indisposedness, and perverseness of heart...”** Notice what this implies — we don't get “well” before we pray but in our prayers we pray for our healing. God alone can do this: His Spirit will eventually take away these things from our lives. It isn't just about “me” but also about others; they need it more than they know. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church is revealing — “That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, *may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him*: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.” (Eph. 1:17-18) Paul's fundamental assumption is that we are blind — we cannot remove it, only God can (we are epistemologically ‘challenged’). Paul also prays that the Spirit “may grant you to be strengthened with power [δυνάμει κραταιωθῆναι] through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph. 3:16). We are weak to do God's will and need His strengthening work — that He would move our will and enable us to work for His good pleasure (cf. Phil. 2:13). We feel it in ourselves but we must also pray the same for our brothers and sisters because they too are weak.

Indisposedness is not a word we use on a regular basis but it is quite apt. We recognize that our wills are adverse, unfit — “the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41). As we look at what we have to do, we find ourselves unmoved or inclined — often hostile and opposed to His will. We know we must do His will but our flesh is too strong for us. We cry to God to take away our reluctant hostile wills! He can warm the heart and make us willing to do His will. No longer indisposed, we find our hearts more drawn to Him from His waves of kindness.

With this indisposition, we also find ourselves dumbfounded by our perverse hearts. The verses used to support “perverseness of the heart” may not immediately explain the point. “I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring

⁶ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 159.

me back that I may be restored, for you are the LORD my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” Think about what these verses are saying — “like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored.” (Jer. 31:18-19) Ephraim recognized how his heart was so unruly and how much he needed God to bring him back. Our hearts are so perverse that only God can bring us back. So in this third petition, we feel our indisposed and perverse hearts and we are astonished by stubbornness — we will not turn to God. The will must be perverse if it does not return to Him while it can. As one writer put it, “The LORD’s initiative will make Ephraim’s action possible.”⁷ We are asking God to take away our perverseness.

That God Would Make Us Able & Willing

The petition includes many positive requests: **and by his grace make us able and willing to know, do, and submit to his will in all things, with the like humility, cheerfulness, faithfulness, diligence, zeal, sincerity, and constancy, as the angels do in heaven.**” Only God’s grace can change us; He can remove sin and implant holiness. God can make us able and willing **“to know, do and submit to his will in all things.”** The Psalmists asks God to enable him to understand and obey God’s commandments: *“Teach me... give me understanding... Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!”* (Ps. 119:33—36) *“Incline my heart”* or “give to my heart (הַטֵּה לִּי)” to your testimonies — the Psalmists knows God must move or incline his heart to it because he cannot do it himself.

It is not enough simply to know and do but the petition includes the attitude. With **humility** and not in pride (the Lord requires that we “*walk humbly*”, Micah 6:8) we are to obey and submit to God’s will. Not grudgingly but **cheerfully** we are to serve the Lord (“*serve the Lord with gladness...*” Ps. 100:2). **Faithfulness** means with all truthfulness and integrity (Is. 38:3). **Diligence** is listed because God commanded that His precepts “*be kept diligently*” (Ps. 119:4). In doing God’s will, we are not to be slothful in our **zeal** but we are to serve the Lord “*fervent in spirit*” (Rom. 12:11, “*Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.*”). **Sincerity** means blameless in this context (Ps. 119:80) — “*May my heart be blameless (הַקִּיָּם) in your statutes...*” That is, we are asking God to enable our hearts to act with sincerity and not with duplicity or half-heartedly. Furthermore, **constancy** means continually doing what God calls us to do (“*I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.*” Ps. 119:112). Too often we do his will occasionally, spasmodically, and only for a season. Isn’t this what we yearn for? O that God would enable us to persevere in well doing. In a sense, we want to be like the angels in heaven who are not encumbered with this body of sin and death. Angels are those mighty ones “*who do his word, obeying the voice of his word... his hosts, his ministers, who do his will*” (Ps. 103:20, 21). Someday, we shall be indefectible (just like the angels) — but in the mean time, let us remember the third petition because we are not like them yet!

All these things are implied in the third petition. We need God’s grace to enable us to know and do His will; we need His Spirit to take away all those things in our hearts that resist His will because of our fallen condition. ***Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven...***

⁷ Gerald L. Keown and Pamela J. Scalise, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC 27; Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Waco: Word Books, 1995), 121.