

Reflections

MARCH 2022

An Agent As Well As A Patient



In Letter V of his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C.S. Lewis discusses the practice of “festooning” while praying The Lord’s Prayer, that is, adding private overtones to the specific petitions. In the excerpt that follows, he discusses the petition, “Thy will be done”:

Thy will be done. My festoons on this have been added gradually. At first I took it exclusively as an act of submission, attempting to do with it what Our Lord did in Gethsemane. I thought of God’s will purely as something that would come upon me, something of which I should be the patient. And I also thought of it as a will which would be embodied in pains and disappointments. Not, to be sure, that I supposed God’s will for me to consist entirely of disagreeables. But I thought it was only the disagreeables that called for this preliminary submission — the agreeables could look after themselves for the present. When they turned up, one could give thanks.

“Thy will be done — by me — now” brings one back to brass tacks.



This interpretation is, I expect, the commonest. And so it must be. And such are the miseries of human life that it must often fill our whole mind. But at other times other meanings can be added. So I added one more.

The peg for it is, I admit, much more obvious in the English version than in the Greek or Latin. No matter: this is where the liberty of festooning comes in. “Thy will *be done*.” But a great deal of it is to be done by God’s creatures; including me. The petition, then, is not merely that I may patiently suffer God’s will but also that I may vigorously do it. I must be an agent as well as a patient. I am asking that I may be enabled to do it. In the long run I am asking to be given “the same mind which was also in Christ.”

Taken this way, I find the words have a more regular daily application. For there isn’t always — or we don’t always have reason to suspect that there is — some great affliction looming in the near future, but there are always duties to be done; usually, for me, neglected duties to be caught up with. “Thy will be *done* — by me — now” brings one back to brass tacks.

But more than that, I am at this very moment contemplating a new festoon. Tell me if you think it a vain subtlety. I am beginning to feel that we need a preliminary act of submission not only towards possible future afflictions but also towards possible future blessings. I know it sounds fantastic; but think it over. It seems to me that we often, almost sulkily, reject the good that God offers us because, at that moment, we expected some other good...³

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, do you sometimes add private overtones? What do you think of Lewis praying not only that he may patiently suffer God’s will but also that he “may vigorously do it”? What “festoosings” might you like to add?



“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

JAMES 1:26-27 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), pp. 25-26.

