

THE PRAYER THEY DIDN'T TEACH YOU

by Jon Garvey

A.C.T.S. - Do you remember that? That's how I was taught to pray when I became a Christian. Adoration - Confession - Thanksgiving - Supplication. And a very useful scheme it is too. It's amazing how many of us are still so bad at the first three.

What I **wasn't** taught was how to pray in tongues, but the Lord has his own way of correcting that deficiency and, again, the main problem for many of us is making the effort to keep using the gift he has given us.

Since then I've heard of one or two other ways of praying, but I have never heard anyone teach, or write, on one very important form of prayer - **COMPLAINING PRAYER**. The very name must mystify many, and offend others - how dare one **complain** to our loving Father?

But actually, there are a good number of such prayers in Scripture, which God does not rebuke, but accepts and answers. Look, for example at Jonah 4.2-4. Or Jeremiah chs 12 and 20. Or Habakkuk 1. Or most striking of all, the complaints in Psalms 10, 13, 22, 44, 64, 74, 79, 80, 90 and 142.

Complaining prayer is not only permissible for the Christian, but is actually essential to healthy spirituality. I have counselled Christians who were deeply depressed by circumstances in their lives. After talking to them, it became clear that their situation had led to their feeling that somehow, God had let them down. But because they knew the teaching that God **never** lets people down, they felt guilty for feeling that way. This led to their either feeling too guilty to pray at all, or to their praying cosmetically acceptable prayers ("O Lord, thank you that you never let people down,") whilst trying to silence the little voice inside that was saying, "But you've let **me** down."

Now if we were perfect, we would have perfect love and trust for God, and we would have nothing to complain about. But we would also have all we need, and no need to pray at all! The fact is, God has given us the gift of prayer to bring us closer to him. If we have a complaint, he wants us to tell him, because then he is in a position to show us why he **hasn't** forgotten or betrayed us. And if, like Jeremiah, our human weakness blinds us to God's love, and he gently chastises us for doubting him - well, isn't that a lot better than a stony silence and the loss of our relationship altogether? Complaining clears the air, and helps us to keep short accounts with the Lord.

I should point out that there is a difference between complaining and grumbling. The Israelites in the desert were always grumbling to Moses and each other about how they had been better off as slaves, etc, etc. And God's usual reply was plagues, snakes and other things most of us would rather avoid! But almost identical complaints voiced by Moses in, say, Exodus 5.22-23, or 17.4 seem to meet with God's approval. Why the difference? Quite simply that the Israelites were complaining **about** God to others, thus showing both their lack of love for him and their unbelief that he could help their situation. Whereas Moses was complaining **to** God in the faith that, somehow, he would be able to make sense of this dreadful situation.

So let us learn to complain in faith! But let that be only a small part of our prayer to the Lord who has given us so little to complain about, and so much to cause our hearts to overflow with praise and thanks both with our minds, and with our spirits.