

## Of What Value are Prayers for the Dead? A Reflection for All Saints Day.

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*For an Anniversary of One Departed.*

ALMIGHTY God, we remember this day before thee thy faithful servant [N.], and we pray thee that, having opened to him the gates of larger life, thou wilt receive him more and more into thy joyful service; that he may win, with thee and thy servants everywhere, the eternal victory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (1928 Book of Common Prayer, p. 598)

*From The Order for The Burial of the Dead*

REMEMBER thy servant, O Lord, according to the favour which thou bearest unto thy people, and grant that, increasing in knowledge and love of thee, he may go from strength to strength, in the life of perfect service, in thy heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.* (1928 Book of Common Prayer, p. 332)

Why should we pray for the dead? Of what value are prayers for the dead? In what way can our prayers be of any assistance to them? These are entirely reasonable questions and ones to which I hope to offer some at least tentative answers in this brief paper.

The first and most obvious question which we must decide is whether prayer, of any sort, is of any value whatsoever? This may seem an absurd question, but it bears asking and answering. If we believe in the authority and divinity of Jesus Christ we must conclude that prayer is very valuable. He Himself prayed often. He enjoined prayer upon his disciples. He states clearly **“If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”** (John 14:14) Of course, asking “in Jesus name” is not some sort of magical talisman, but rather means, “according to His will or nature.” According to the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles fervently obeyed our Lord’s injunction to pray. Certainly the Apostolic Letters are full of injunctions to pray. It follows that obedience to our Lord’s and the Apostle’s commands and a faithful following of their examples requires us to pray.

This begs the question of what our prayers actually accomplish. While this is probably beyond our comprehension to fully understand, they most surely do something useful. Saint James tells us, **“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”** (James 5:16) To go much beyond this is speculation. To be sure, our prayers cannot prevail *against* God. They cannot cause Him to do something He does not intend to do, or not to do something He intends to do. (The attempt to manipulate God is the precise definition of magic. God does not respond at all favorably to magic.) On the other hand, our prayers can and do prevail *with* God. In some way which is beyond our full comprehension, our prayers are used by Him to accomplish His purposes and thus are very valuable.

If we accept that prayer is valuable, that it does something useful and good, this leaves the question of whether or not our prayers for the dead assist them in some meaningful way. The prayer with which I began this paper suggests that they do. We ask God to “receive him more and more into thy joyful service.” This prayer obviously presupposes a certain view of the present state of the departed. If we envision the dead in Christ as being inert until the day of Resurrection, such prayer is meaningless. This view, known as “soul sleep” has its adherents, to be sure. St. Paul often refers to death as “sleep.” The

